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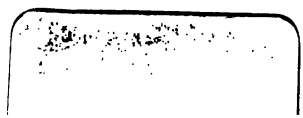

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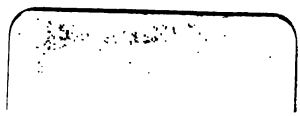

THE

MYSTERY OF ASHLEIGH MANOR.

A Romance.

BY

ELIZA RHYL DAVIES.

"Unnatural deeds
Do breed unnatural troubles; infected minds
To their deaf pillows will discharge their secrets."
MACBETH.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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THE

MYSTERY OF ASHLEIGH MANOR.

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CHAPTER I.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF MR. MERTON'S DELUSION?

LITTLE Laura Merton was buried in the grave-yard at Ashleigh. I visited her grave a few days after her burial, and found that her coffin rested near to that of her mother. A sweet calm place was this little grave-yard. A picturesque old church, with its square tower hidden under green ivy, stood in the centre of it, and threw its shadows over the graves like the outstretched wings of a bird sheltering its young. The grass sprouted luxuriantly from the rich soil; but though it was obvious that

the burial-ground was tended, there was a total absence of that air of trim cultivation which one sees in modern cemeteries, and which, to my mind, always makes death grim, as it were, by exposure. When I die I could wish to be buried in some grave-yard that owes its beauty to nature and not to man. Man makes death obtrusive by trimming the graves and clipping the evergreens, and setting a neat border of flowers along the well-kept gravel walks. Nature is more tender, and brings green leaves and flowers wherewith to mask the tombstones; and for my part I cannot but think—if a choice in such matters be not a sad vanity—that it were many times more desirable to lie under the simple mound on which nature writes an epitaph in flowers and which she beautifies with green grass, than under a great marble block, gilt-lettered with laudatory words, and framed in an iron railing, as if the earth did not lie heavy enough on the dead. "I care little or nothing about a stone for my own grave," says a modern writer, "and am somewhat inclined to scepticism as to the propriety of erecting monuments at all over the dust that once was human. The weight of these heavy marbles, though unfelt by the dead corpse or the en-

franchised soul, presses drearily upon the spirit of the survivor, and causes him to connect the idea of death with the dungeon-like imprisonment of the tomb, instead of with the freedom of the skies. Every grave-stone that you ever made is the visible symbol of a mistaken system. Our thoughts should soar upwards with the butterfly, not linger with the exuviæ that confined him. In truth and reason, neither those whom we call the living, and still less the departed, have anything to do with the grave."*

Shortly after Laura's death, the good news spread that the fever was abating; and now the servants who had remained with us during our time of trouble, began to pluck up their spirits and go about their work with their usual cheerfulness. And yet, God knows! the house was sombre enough: clad, so to speak, from top to toe in complete mourning.

I did not see much of Mr. Merton. He often chose to breakfast, and even dine by himself in the library, in which room he may be said, during this time, to have almost entirely lived. When we met, I observed in his manner a suggestion of resignation—though that word does not accurately define

* Hawthorne.

the quality I noticed. Melancholy he was indeed; yet he did not seem to me morbid as he had been heretofore. I missed in him the sullen moodiness which had made his abstractive fits grim.

I could only trust that he had petitioned God to relieve his great heart-ache, and that his prayer had been answered. His language was softer, tempered even to a degree of docility. And yet how sad were his eyes! how wan his face! how despondent his manner! His very walk betokened that he was a miserable man.

His pleasure at the beginning of his bereavement was to talk to me of Laura; and he would ask me many questions which were fit, perhaps, only to be addressed to a clergyman, or to one wiser and older and better than I. Yet death, which so often effects the holy purpose of winning the human mind from infidelity, appeared to have shrunk his faith into a more defined form of materialism than he had ever before expressed or suffered me to witness. I could see that his inclinations were all on the side of the religion taught by our Redeemer, but his reason opposed them. The struggle—for a struggle it was—was a sad one to witness in a mind so vigorous

and enlightened, and to which Sorrow had made so many revelations, all bearing witness to the great truths of the Gospel. He wanted to believe in a future life; his love for the little child who had gone before him made such a belief necessary to his happiness; and sometimes he launched into a strain of reasoning which, had he stopped short its career, would have persuaded me that he was a deep believer in the truths of the Gospel. But on a sudden he would start an objection, and argue on it in such a fashion, as would turn into irony his previous confessions. Yet the awe and veneration with which he spoke of things sacred, as if his instincts recognised their truth, and defied reason to corrupt their faith, induced me to think that he was held back not so much by scepticism as by an apprehension of his own total unworthiness to enter upon the peace he would sometimes paint with tenderest words. Often in speaking of Laura, a look of utter despair would enter his face. Once he cried out passionately:

"I shall never see her again! Do not talk to *me* of heaven! There is a heaven for such as she, but *my* only heaven is extinction. Do you believe in hell? I do—but not in the material hell of the priests; not in the

lake of fire into which we are told the sinful are cast. I believe in the hell which Milton tells us the mind can make of heaven itself. I believe in the hell of the heart. Conscience is Satan. The monkish conception of the Devil stirring up the souls consigned to him with a pitchfork, is shocking and monstrous, if considered in reference to a benevolent God ; but is true if considered in reference to the heart. Conscience holds her pitchfork, and in that flaming arena the heart, stirs up the damned memories that welter there, making life a hell. That is my creed. Is it materialistic ? No—my hell is less materialistic than yours, if you believe in hell."

Such language might have terrified me, had I not imagined that he referred only to the miserable past he had lived through with his wife, and to this culmination of grief occasioned by the death of his child.

And yet I would often wonder that he should talk as if his heart really held some terrible memory, for such would have been the impression his language must have conveyed to those who did not know him as I in my conceit believed I did. As the time passed, however, he ceased to harass himself with these vain speculations ; at least, he

seldom intruded them in his conversation with me.

After a proper interval had been suffered to elapse, Lady Callender and her daughter called. They were admitted. I was not present during their visit, but I judged it must have been satisfactory to them, for a few days after they found an excuse to call again. Nor were they the only visitors. Many neighbours came with their condolences, and to my surprise and satisfaction were welcomed by Mr. Merton. I hoped now that he would make an effort once more to resume his place in society, and shake off his melancholy. Indeed, I never could conceive his object in isolating himself, and remaining so entirely at home. He was a rich man. Why did he not travel? He had no ties now to keep him to Ashleigh Manor; why did he not go away for two or three months? His health demanded a change, and so did his mind. I would have liked once more to make the suggestion to him; but I remembered how he had chilled me that day when I had ventured to express my anxiety for his health, and I determined not to risk encountering his resentment again.

I remember one morning being in my bed-

room when one of the housemaids entered. She was a well-spoken, respectable woman. I liked her better than the others. Her promptness and obliging nature had been of much use to me when I had first undertaken the duties of housekeeping, and I was pleased by the real sorrow she had shown at the death of poor little Laura.

I was changing my dress when she came in. On seeing me she would have withdrawn, but I told her she could get on with her work. Thrown so much as I had been of late with the servants, it is not surprising that I should very often indulge in a familiar chat with them. She said to me, presently :

" Master takes on very sorely, miss, at poor Miss Laura's death."

" Yes," I answered, " but I hope his sorrow will diminish in time."

" It was terrible enough for mistress to be murdered," said she; " I don't think master ever got over that."

" It was a dreadful shock to him."

" I often wonder what's become of Wakefield ; don't you, miss ? Some of the servants think she made away with herself when she heard that the constables was after her. But I never could fancy that myself; she always

seemed to me too fearful a girl to kill herself." Fearful she used in the sense of timorous or cowardly.

"I have ceased to think of her," I responded; "but there can be no question that she is dead. She would certainly have been captured ere now had she been alive."

"But don't you think she might have gone to foreign parts, miss? to America or Australia?"

"How could she have got there? She was without friends, and I doubt if she had saved money enough to pay her fare. If we presume her to be alive, it is more likely that she escaped to London or some large city, and found a situation there under an assumed name. I dare say she would have no difficulty in procuring a place without a character if she sought among the poorer classes."

"It's very awful and strange," said she, thoughtfully, "to think of her killing her mistress. Why, when she first came here she was so shy and quiet in the kitchen, that we used to fancy she thought herself our better, until we discovered it was her fearfulness that made her silent. She was the most timid girl I ever knew. When mistress used to speak savage to her, she'd come down-stairs

and stand in a corner, crying, but so quietly that there was no telling she was shedding tears until you looked at her face. I'd often say to her, 'Jane, for goodness' sake why don't you give mistress as good as she gives you; yo've got no sperrit. If she was to speak to me as she do to you, I'd fly into her face, and not mind the consequence, I would.' But she'd always answer that she couldn't abear the thought of being turned away without a character, though she'd tell me that if mistress only would promise to speak for her, she'd go at onced."

"It is rather late in the day to discuss Wakefield's character," I answered; "I used to think with you that it was impossible so timid a creature as she appeared could have committed that murder. But I soon saw that it was absurd to suppose she had not done this deed simply because it seemed as if she could not have done it. I dare say you have often met with servants in the different places you have had who have turned out very different persons from what you imagined them."

"Oh yes, miss, that I have."

"Meanwhile we are talking as if there were no proofs whatever of Wakefield having murdered Mrs. Merton. There is no use in that.

She is convicted of the crime by the evidence of her flight and the pocket-handkerchief; and we ought to be very thankful that there was evidence, for who knows on whom suspicion might not have fastened?"

"Oh, yes, I have often thought of that, miss; and most shocking it is to think."

Here I took up a brush with which to give my hair a parting touch. My companion was silent. I thought her gossip had come to an end; but presently I heard a nervous cough.

"Excuse me asking you, miss, but do you know why master goes every day into the old house?"

"Does he do so? I did not know," I answered, turning, and looking at her.

"He doesn't go at any regular hour, but I'm quite sure he goes there pretty nigh every day."

"I suppose you have seen him?"

"Yes, miss; but not through spying. I've seen him go in morning, noon, and night, not regularly, but on different days. The other servants have noticed him too; but we have a kind of fancy that master wouldn't be pleased to think we knew of his going there."

"Why?"

"I can't exactly tell why. It struck Mardon first when he was here. There's something in master's manner—in the way he comes out of the door—indeed, then, I can't tell why. But when Mardon said to me, 'Sarah, I don't think master would like us to know he's pretty constintly going into the old house,' I didn't say to him, 'Why, Mardon?' as another might, because somehow or other the selfsame notion had crossed my mind."

"You surprise me. I have never observed that Mr. Merton goes into the old house with any regularity."

"Well, miss, it is surprising, as you say. We used to talk of it in the kitchen; but we don't now, for we fancy that master goes on some business of his own, and it isn't our concern. Servants will talk," said she, with a smile.

"Most likely Mr. Merton makes it his practice to look over his house once a day. It is natural that he should. The disused portion of the house is quite unprotected, and it would be easy for thieves to enter. Most of the rooms are furnished; and there are many pictures in them, some of them, doubtless, of value."

"That is master's reason, I dare say, miss.

But I have seen him come out of the anteroom as early as six o'clock in the morning."

"Six o'clock!"

"Yes, miss, not longer ago than five days. I was sweeping down the gallery staircase, and heard some one at one of the doors downstairs. I stopped my brushing, and peeped over the banisters. It was Mr. Merton, who went to the library, having come from the part of the hall where the anteroom door is."

"That was a strange hour for him to choose for his rounds. Are you sure that he came out of the old part of the house?"

"I wouldn't be quite sure, for I couldn't see the door from the gallery; but I haven't very much doubt myself."

I was puzzled by what I heard, and eyed her thoughtfully.

"I hope I'm not acting impudent in talking like this, miss?"

"Certainly not. However, I would help, if I were you, to check any discussions on Mr. Merton's actions in the kitchen."

I was in the act of leaving the room, when it came into my head to say,

"I suppose you know why Mr. Merton has locked up the old part of the house?"

By putting the question I hoped to screen

Mr. Merton from the criticism which it was quite likely this action had already provoked in the kitchen, by telling the truth.

"No, miss, I don't know."

"Because he found that under the pretence of answering the old house bell, or of tidying the rooms, the servants loitered, and angered both him and Mrs. Merton by the long time they took in answering the bells in the west wing."

"Well, now," she exclaimed, seemingly surprised, "I have been over two years in this house, and I never heard that complaint made before."

"It is true," said I, confidently; "but it does not follow that you are one of the culprits. But of course you know that Mr. Merton—no, it was Mrs. Saunders, I think—discovered the whole of you drinking and playing at cards in one of the rooms in the old house."

"Begging your pardon, miss, if Mrs. Saunders told you this, she told a downright lie," she cried, warmly.

"Surely," I said, "this is true."

"It is not true," she replied, emphatically. "If ever drinking and gaming went on in the old rooms, it happened before my time, and

Mrs. Saunders's, too, for I was here when she came."

"Well, perhaps I mistake; perhaps it did not happen in Mrs. Saunders's time," I said, with a very disagreeable misgiving in my heart.

"But surely, miss, I should have heard of it?"

"The servants who behaved so badly may all have left before you came?"

"I can't tell, for I don't know when it did happen; but I could recollect if I had been told of it, and I certainly never did hear of it before now, and I am truly surprised."

I considered that enough had been said, and went away. And enough had been said, indeed! for the conversation had revived in me all the old sense of some strange and *dree* mystery enshrouding Mr. Merton.

It had once before flashed upon me that the excuses he had made for locking up the old house were mere hurried inventions framed on the spot, to account for an act which was one of the conundrums of his present life. I had implicitly believed the statements when first made, for I could not conceive that he should have any reasons for being untruthful.

Heaven forgive me! I had no right to

imagine him untruthful now. He had told me that the housekeeper who had witnessed the midnight revelry of the servants was Mrs. Saunders; but in his hurry he might have confounded his last housekeeper with her predecessor. Considered thus, the housemaid's ignorance did not prove his falsity. And indeed had the conversation I had held with the woman only been concerned with this particular, I might still have thoroughly believed in the reasons Mr. Merton had assigned.

But how about his mysterious incursions? What object could he have in entering rooms, the very name of which seemed to send a shock through him, as if the recollection of their chilly gloom became a physical sensation? In my mind, my ignorance of these visits which the housemaid had affirmed to be of frequent, indeed of daily occurrence, gave to them a mystery which would not have been attached to them had they not been surreptitious. What more plausible, what indeed more probable, than the reason I had found for them on the spur of the moment! It was natural enough as I had suggested, that he should from time to time—nay, every day, if he would—enter the old house for the purpose of seeing that everything was safe.

But why did he make a secret of these visits? and what manner of apprehension respecting his house could draw him from his bed so early as six o'clock?

My mind, made busy now by the mystery of this strange man's actions, which every fresh revelation only served further to complicate, went to work to put together the recollection of every action of his which might in any wise justify suspicion or surprise, in the forlorn hope of hitting upon a probable solution.

But my long reasoning was absolutely vain.

I thought of the Angels' Court; and whatever imagination could conceive to invest that dreary spot with interest enough to account for Mr. Merton's visits to that part of the house, I peopled it with, until it became in fancy as fell and baleful a neighbourhood as superstition in her most active frenzy could make it. In vain. The mouldy old gallery hung with dim and ancient pictures; the faded pavement of the yard; the stained window, dust-begrimed and so plentifully draped with cobwebs that the daylight struggled with difficulty through the glass; the shadows in the corners so swart and sullen that out of them imagination might carve a

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legion of spectres to mouth their inarticulate gibberings—the picture was present to my mind's eye; nor did memory neglect to make it yet more weird, by recalling the hollow sound which had seemed to me to pierce through the solid masonry of the wall or the stone flooring of the court.

But what sombre and tragical interest had I to connect with it to solve for me the problem of Mr. Merton's conduct? Might not I be straining at a gnat? Let me conceive it possible for Mr. Merton to be influenced by some singular delusion which yet should be rendered logical by the nature of the melancholy that preyed upon him; and the mystery might be solved.

I had before fancied a solution to the riddle of his melancholy; why might not I now picture the kind of delusion which would account for his visits to the deserted chambers?

Many instances of the victims of overpowering delusions occurred to me. For instance, I had read of a mother who, having lost her baby, was night after night possessed with the singular belief that the child was cold and wanted to be cherished; influenced thus by an idea which operated upon her with the force of conviction, she would steal from

her husband's side to the graveyard in which her child lay buried. She never attempted to remove the soil that covered the remains of her infant; but was satisfied to think that her presence gave it the warmth for which it craved; and after waiting some few minutes, she would return to her bed. Night after night she persisted in these visits, until she took a cold, which, producing a fever, put an end to her life. Another instance that suggested itself was that of the well-known delusions of Nicholai, whose memoirs, written by himself, were at that period still read with interest and terror. Here was a man who, during a certain portion of the day, was haunted by the apparition of a figure which sometimes pursued him and sometimes vanished. Nor was this his only tormentor, for after six o'clock in the evening, several other figures would also appear. The imagination that could give bodily form to such terrors as these might easily endow them with irresistible influence; so that, like Frankenstein, the hapless ghost-seer could be led by the magnetic monsters of his own creation into the wildest vagaries, and haply to his destruction.

In conceiving Mr. Merton to be influenced

by some such shadowy being as this, I did no dishonour to his intellect, which I ever regarded as in the highest degree powerful and acute. There are numerous instances recorded of individuals of the greatest intelligence having been long duped by fatuities which, sincerely as their judgment might protest against their dictates, were irresistible. In endeavouring to give shape to the kind of illusion which affected Mr. Merton, I conceived, among other theories, the notion that he might have imagined his wife's spirit to have appeared to him, charged with the mission to vex, oppress, and yet influence him. I pictured him conceiving that this spirit haunted a certain chamber in the old house—perchance the Angels' Court—and that the sense of her presence there irritated him into pursuing her and causing her to vanish out of the house over which she in life had spread so dark a shadow. Or reprobating this notion, if you will, as absurd, and an insult to the man's understanding, it was still possible to image his delusion to take the form of Something—be it ghost or goblin, or a nameless terror—which forced him to lock up the portion of the house it haunted, to prevent its intrusion into the west wing; but which also

exerted an invisible force that drew him with reluctant steps to the precincts of its abode, there, perchance, to give it battle, even as fanatics strive with a material enemy in Satan, or to hold converse with it and receive from it the intelligence which sank his spirits in the deepest melancholy.

How are you laughing at this reasoning! I smile too as I review these strange ideas; yet not very mirthfully, for they have reference to an issue which you will not find very provocative of merriment. Over that house was then gathering the shadow of a gloom even darker than the shadow that superstition throws. Nor did the intelligence of my spirits deceive me, though before long that gloom was to be temporarily dispersed by a lurid light which I, hardly less fatuous than I conceived Mr. Merton, was to mistake for the transcendent lustre of happiness.

By the systematic way in which I went about my duties, bridling my thoughts, and perhaps completing the imposture of indifference to his melancholy by silencing in myself the quick, keen whispers of curiosity, he could not guess how thoroughly he engrossed my mind, and how frequent and varied were the speculations I wasted upon

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I had before fancied a solution to the riddle of his melancholy; why might not I now picture the kind of delusion which would account for his visits to the deserted chambers?

Many instances of the victims of overpowering delusions occurred to me. For instance, I had read of a mother who, having lost her baby, was night after night possessed with the singular belief that the child was cold and wanted to be cherished; influenced thus by an idea which operated upon her with the force of conviction, she would steal from

her husband's side to the graveyard in which her child lay buried. She never attempted to remove the soil that covered the remains of her infant; but was satisfied to think that her presence gave it the warmth for which it craved; and after waiting some few minutes, she would return to her bed. Night after night she persisted in these visits, until she took a cold, which, producing a fever, put an end to her life. Another instance that suggested itself was that of the well-known delusions of Nicholai, whose memoirs, written by himself, were at that period still read with interest and terror. Here was a man who, during a certain portion of the day, was haunted by the apparition of a figure which sometimes pursued him and sometimes vanished. Nor was this his only tormentor, for after six o'clock in the evening, several other figures would also appear. The imagination that could give bodily form to such terrors as these might easily endow them with irresistible influence; so that, like Frankenstein, the hapless ghost-seer could be led by the magnetic monsters of his own creation into the wildest vagaries, and haply to his destruction.

In conceiving Mr. Merton to be influenced

by some such shadowy being as this, I did no dishonour to his intellect, which I ever regarded as in the highest degree powerful and acute. There are numerous instances recorded of individuals of the greatest intelligence having been long duped by fatuities which, sincerely as their judgment might protest against their dictates, were irresistible. In endeavouring to give shape to the kind of illusion which affected Mr. Merton, I conceived, among other theories, the notion that he might have imagined his wife's spirit to have appeared to him, charged with the mission to vex, oppress, and yet influence him. I pictured him conceiving that this spirit haunted a certain chamber in the old house—perchance the Angels' Court—and that the sense of her presence there irritated him into pursuing her and causing her to vanish out of the house over which she in life had spread so dark a shadow. Or reprobating this notion, if you will, as absurd, and an insult to the man's understanding, it was still possible to image his delusion to take the form of Something—be it ghost or goblin, or a nameless terror—which forced him to lock up the portion of the house it haunted, to prevent its intrusion into the west wing; but which also

exerted an invisible force that drew him with reluctant steps to the precincts of its abode, there, perchance, to give it battle, even as fanatics strive with a material enemy in Satan, or to hold converse with it and receive from it the intelligence which sank his spirits in the deepest melancholy.

How are you laughing at this reasoning! I smile too as I review these strange ideas; yet not very mirthfully, for they have reference to an issue which you will not find very provocative of merriment. Over that house was then gathering the shadow of a gloom even darker than the shadow that superstition throws. Nor did the intelligence of my spirits deceive me, though before long that gloom was to be temporarily dispersed by a lurid light which I, hardly less fatuous than I conceived Mr. Merton, was to mistake for the transcendent lustre of happiness.

By the systematic way in which I went about my duties, bridling my thoughts, and perhaps completing the imposture of indifference to his melancholy by silencing in myself the quick, keen whispers of curiosity, he could not guess how thoroughly he engrossed my mind, and how frequent and varied were the speculations I wasted upon

him. And less than ever now was his chance of discovering my love. Not that I loved him with a diminished passion; but Laura's death had in a sense altered our relations, though not in such a degree as to make my position in the smallest sense uncomfortable. His child had heretofore stood between him and me—had linked us even while she had kept us separate. Now that she was gone our contact was more immediate. This sense of nearness made me draw the curtains of secrecy more jealously about my love. But this was the only effect it produced. In truth, I was too innocent and ignorant of the world's ways of thinking, to see wrong where wrong was not palpable.

One consequence of my conversation with the housemaid was to set me watching to see how often he entered the old house. But strange to say, for the several weeks that followed, I never once saw him emerging from or entering the ante-room. *Now* I know why. *Then* I believed that the girl had exaggerated, and that his visits must be of rarer occurrence than she declared. I would not question her, however, or recur to the subject. I seemed to have a share in Mr. Merton's dignity, and tended and protected it as watchfully as if it

were my own. Indeed, if I had not felt this how could I hope to persuade you that I loved him? Had we been betrothed my sympathy with him could not have been keener. The very repression of my love gave it strength by obliging me to concentrate it. Could it have been diffused in smiles and caresses, and the sweet nonsense which is the lover's eloquence, it would have been weaker. The emotion could find no outlet in my eyes, or face, or voice; it drained back again into my heart and there it burned. It gave me pain, unendurable pain at times, when jealousy fanned it; but still I could find modes of giving my heart relief. It was a great joy to me to wait upon him, to anticipate his wants, to be near him and to hear him speak, to feel even that I had a collateral claim upon his kindness by my love for the child of whom death had robbed him. To other people he must doubtless have appeared but a grim sort of man with his bloodless face, the ruggedness of which was marked almost to deformity by the sinking in of the flesh and the livid hollows under his eyes. Yet no handsomest hero of fiction was ever more fascinating to heroine than was Mr. Merton to me. His melancholy, which might have repelled others, was an

element of interest I found singularly attractive. Despite the mystery that enshrouded him—I say despite, but in truth it drew me to him with a magnetic force that is comparable only to something at once baleful and bewitching—despite, however, let me say the mystery that enshrouded him, I could still trace beneath it the proportions of a manly, an intellectual, an honourable mind, the partial concealment of which only served to enflame my admiration by giving scope to imagination. So the ancients represented the god of their worship half obscured by clouds. So beauty is painted *semi-reducta*. Love must be fed by fancy or how shall it nourish its ideal? The woman is a fool who desires to know all the man she loves; for in this case there is no revelation so disappointing as truth. Let your dream be rose-tinted whilst it lasts. Though your idol be clay—no matter; think it marble as long as you can. That hankering after knowledge some women have is a sad blunder when it concerns the heart. Keep your own innocence fresh and the world will seem fair enough; a single rose will make a garden of the barrenest slip of land. Are you engaged to be married? Take the advice of an old woman and ask no questions. The

heart has its religion, and we, members of the credulous sex, call it love. Shall we corrupt the sentiment by materialism? Shall we clamour for proof when our business is to believe? The ancients worshipped images and believed in their gods and were happy in their mud-creed. We have our plaster too, which we worship. Let us be as wise at least as the Romans, and make our faith as satisfactory. If the plaster we worship vouchsafes us no answer—if the things we desire come not to pass—if the hopes we have cherished are disappointed and our tears flow—let us lay the blame to ourselves, hold the plaster still divine and pretend that we have not prayed as we should, or that we have solicited the boon it would work us ill to have granted. That is our part in life. It is for men to cavil, not women. We are sent here to cry and own we are in the wrong. If we do more than this the tears we shed will be sincere.

CHAPTER II.

LADY CALLENDER ACTS A FRIEND'S PART.

OUGHT to have guessed that there was another besides myself who could see something to admire and to love in Mr. Merton. If Miss Callender's feelings towards him did not strike me as sincere it was not from any want of warmth in her demonstrations. Her ladyship must be charged with my incredulity. She it was, much more than her daughter, who made me suspect that Miss Callender was without sincerity. The foolish old lady, I say, made her game too obvious. You would have thought she considered herself the only woman since the world was created who had played at hazard with Fortune with her daughter for a dice-box; that mankind therefore were quite ignorant of this game, and that her cheating would never be found out. The sorrow she

feigned when she called and fell to condoling with Mr. Merton on his loss was not in nature. The mask might be of very good wax; but no well-fed face *could* look so sad and woe-begone as the mask did through which she snivelled at Mr. Merton. It would have done very well at a carnival or masquerade as a burlesque on sympathy; but in real life, under such circumstances!——

Miss Callender did better. So well, indeed, did she act, that I was sure Mr. Merton confounded the performance with nature. Here was no active grief, here no blubbersome condolences, no plying of cambric, nor misquotations from Holy Writ. When she spoke of Laura, she uttered the name softly, as if there were no lack of emotion behind her language which she would not obtrude. Certainly, this girl had in perfection the art of being eloquent by implication. I never met anybody else who possessed that trick in an equal degree. Her conversation was liberally stocked with what I must call blank parentheses, which the person she talked with filled up with pretty ideas, and gave her the credit of them. Such an art would necessarily suppose the possession of very tolerable abilities; and clever she was. She snubbed me rather,

which made me despise her ; and she tried to get Mr. Merton to marry her, which made me hate her. But had she left Mr. Merton alone, and treated me with more respect, I think she would have pleased me.

I like high-flavoured characters. I like idiosyncratic people ; I hate persons with missions ; but I like persons who have definite objects, which they pursue with zeal. There was no doubt that Miss Callender's mind was a very piquant dish. The portion she helped me to had too much pepper on it to please me ; but she had milder condiments for more favoured guests. And then, though her beauty never made me lose myself in admiration, she was certainly a handsome woman, and a lady. I once saw her walking up and down the lawn with Mr. Merton ; and she looked so conquering and fine with the sunlight on her amber hair, and the shadow of her becoming hat giving a melting intelligence to her eyes, that my very body seemed to contract with a physical sensation of smallness, and I turned away peevish and miserable, with the conviction that she was running a winning race, and that before a few months had passed I should be politely bowed out of Ashleigh Manor.

As Mr. Merton was now occasionally seen in the neighbourhood, accompanied by Lady Callender and her daughter, a rumour sprung up that he was engaged to be married.

The person I had the news from was Sarah, the housemaid, a doubtful witness, you will think; yet she declared that the information had been given her by the letter-carrier (her sweetheart), who had it from one of the tradesmen, who had it from an attorney, who had it from everybody.

This piece of intelligence made me turn very pale, and feel for the moment so ill, that I was terrified lest the good-natured housemaid should suspect the cause. Was it true? I wondered. Ashleigh was very provincial; and unfounded gossip is a condition of the life bucolic. Given a small town, and let a young man and a young woman walk from the top of the High Street to the bottom in the full blaze of the public eye, and to-morrow simpering congratulations shall be offered them, and they shall be asked when the happy event is to take place. The provincial mind must go on marrying somebody to somebody else, or it will go mad. The gossip is sometimes harmless, and probably a source of satisfaction to some girls who, in the absence of

husbands, can at least console themselves with the reflection that they have been engaged to be married by public opinion; which, though an illusion, is still valuable, as illusions are very often the shadows of truth.

But sometimes this sort of gossip is intolerable. I found it so in my case. It might be true. Why should it not be? More than a year had expired since Mr. Merton had been a widower; and even pious society will not exact a longer term of mourning from a bereaved person than twelve months. He had grown more resigned to the loss of his child; that was certain, or he would hardly have taken the pleasure he seemed to find in Miss Callender's society.

And supposing he were to marry her, what could his marriage signify to me? Let me mind my own business. How dared I lift my eyes, even in imagination, to this man? Let me superintend the kitchen-work, see that the rooms were swept, and that the servants did their duty; that was my affair. Let me pocket my wages, and be thankful. And when Mr. Merton himself should have informed me of his approaching nuptials with Miss Callender, then let me set to work to find another situation, and shake the dust off

my feet against the fool's paradise I had made of Ashleigh Manor.

Yet, what had come over Lady Callender, that, when we met, she should eye me with a solicitude I had never before observed in her? She became friendly on a sudden; dropped the rather haughty air with which she had been wont to confront me, and amazed me by taking an interest in my past life.

I remember the occasion—it was one October afternoon. I was in the library, whither I had repaired on hearing that the Callenders were in the drawing-room with Mr. Merton. A ruddy fire glowed in the grate; I stood before it with outstretched hands, revolving, as Dr. Johnson would put it, the vicissitude of things, but chiefly concerned in trying to warm my fingers.

The door opened, and in sailed her ladyship.

"Now," thought I, "you want to make me an excuse to leave your daughter and Mr. Merton alone."

This was not the first time by many she had played this trick. When I have been present, I have seen her get up from her chair, and brush past me with a look, as if she should

say, "Be off with you, do!" and go to the conservatory, where she has lost herself in admiration of the flowers, though I would sometimes detect her fat face and Indian eyes gazing askew at the couple through the foliage.

"Oh, Miss Malcolmson," she cried, in a very friendly voice, "I had no idea you were here. May I sit down?" Down she sat. "What a delightful fire you have there! The weather has turned very cold. We poor Indians suffer frightfully from your climate. Have you any connexions in India?"

"No," I replied, not absolutely alarmed by her friendliness, for her previous behaviour had in a measure sloped the way to this demonstration.

"Have you any relatives living?"

"Two; but they are no friends of mine. I may as well say that I have no relatives."

"Dear me," said she, with that air of counterfeit interest which she often employed to Mr. Merton, "it does you great credit to have gained such a position as you now hold."

"It does me no credit that I am aware of," I answered, coldly. "My real vocation is

that of governess. It was Mr. Merton's wish that after poor Laura's death I should remain with him as housekeeper, and for his sake I consented to do so."

She gave me a keen look as I uttered the words, "for his sake," and said :

"But still you must admit that you are very young to fill a responsible position, and I think it does you great credit that Mr. Merton should consider you worthy to accept it."

"If you please," thought I. I wouldn't dispute.

"You have been some time at Ashleigh Manor, have you not?" continued she.

"Yes; I came here a few months before Mrs. Merton died."

"And you have no friends?"

"None to speak of," I replied, wondering at her questions.

"Ah, then that would account for you not taking the view of the position you occupy, which cannot fail to suggest itself to others."

"I beg your ladyship's pardon. I really don't quite understand."

"If you had friends," she went on, with an air of embarrassment, which was plainly assumed, for there was a sub-element of cool-

ness in her manner, which intimated that she must have rehearsed what she was now saying too carefully to feel timidity; "if you had friends, I am quite sure they would before now have hinted to you that you occupy a rather delicate situation—in fact so delicate that I have no doubt they would wish to have you removed."

"Delicate position!"

"I am sure," said she, with a gracious smile, "that I owe you an apology for taking the liberty to talk to you so unreservedly. But your friendlessness appeals to me. I am a mother, Miss Malcolmson, and have seen much of the world, and I cannot but think," drawing herself up, "it my duty, observing how the very innocence of your youth prevents you from seeing things in their true light, to put you on your guard, and even advise you to take measures to obviate those cruel remarks which it is only too certain the world — the cold-hearted world — loves to make, particularly where young girls are concerned."

"Will you kindly explain, for I assure you that I have not the least notion of your ladyship's meaning."

"Your blindness only convinces me how

necessary it is that your eyes should be opened. Is it possible that you cannot guess that your residence here—in this house—alone with Mr. Merton, excites comment ?"

"What can be said ?"

"A very great deal, I assure you," she answered, shaking her head.

The blood rushed to my face, for I saw what she meant now.

"Is it possible," I cried, indignantly, "that there are people base enough to witness matter of suspicion in my being housekeeper here ?"

"There are, indeed. It is wonderful what a number of base people there are in the world. It is humiliating even to repeat the scandal which the world will manufacture out of the most innocent actions. But a young lady's business is to take things as they are. People's mouths are not to be shut. A young girl is bound to protect herself against the aspersions which threaten her character, by withdrawing herself from the position that provokes them."

"And do you mean to tell me, Lady Callender, that I ought to leave Ashleigh Manor because there are people ignoble enough to see evil in my residence here ?"

"It is for you to judge, not for me to advise. I was pretty sure you had no friends, or I believe they would have taken you away after Mrs. Merton's death. As a mother, and a woman who has mixed much with life, I feel privileged to be candid with you. Should my Conny ever be placed as you are, I only hope and pray that she may meet with a friend who will have courage enough to tell her the truth."

And she pursed up her mouth and fixed her eyes on the wall, as if somebody had wronged her.

I was completely dumbfounded by what I heard; but my heart throbbed with indignation. I could have burst into tears, so sharp was the sense of the injustice done me conveyed by her words.

"And who has dared to take the liberty of discussing me?" I asked, raising my flushed face.

"I heartily sympathise with your warmth. I know nothing more cruel and hard to bear than unfounded accusations. I only hope you are not angry with me for having spoken."

"No. I daresay your ladyship means kindly. What can people say? Is it so

very uncommon for a gentleman in Mr. Merton's position, whether he be a widower or not, to employ the services of housekeeper ?"

"But you see," said she, smiling, "that you are not housekeeper. You came here as governess, and your occupation being taken from you by your poor little pupil's death, people naturally inquire under what pretence you still remain in the house."

"Under what pretence ?" I cried, smarting at the term. "Whoever knows me, knows that I am housekeeper."

"Yes ; but ill-natured people will say that the pretence lies in the calling yourself housekeeper."

"Monstrous !"

"People," continued she, "cannot, or refuse to be brought to, believe that a young lady who entered a house avowedly as governess —a position in the highest degree respectable —would condescend to take up the duties of an upper servant. Pray pardon me—but such indeed is a housekeeper."

"Well, but supposing the governess *does* condescend ?"

"Can you get them—I mean the gossips—to believe it ?"

"But what can their opinion matter ?"

"Ah—now—that is another thing. Speaking as a woman, I should say that the opinion of the world is everything to our sex. We live by it, we are raised by it, and it can crush us. You—a young girl—not yet twenty-one, I daresay,—with all the world before you! oh dear! you must not sneer at public opinion. How do you ever hope to marry, Miss Malcolmson, if once the world has fastened its ill-natured labels on you? And putting marriage aside, and presuming that your livelihood is dependent on your own exertions, how do you expect to get on if you defy the opinion of the world and act as if the code of morality which society commands our sex to conform to had no existence? No, no; take my advise: if you cannot respect the opinion of the world try at least to defer to it."

"But I *am* housekeeper here!" I exclaimed helplessly, obliged to see that there was a good deal of truth in what Lady Callender said.

"Of course we—your friends—know that you are; but people who are not your friends won't believe it."

"Why shouldn't they?"

"For several reasons. In the first place as I have said, they would think you too much of a lady to undertake such a post. In the

next place, housekeepers are as a rule elderly or middle-aged persons, who have had great experience as servants. Other reasons would occur if I reflected a little. But surely it must suffice you to know that your position here *is* commented upon, and, I am given to understand, supplying the gossips with a subject for conversation which, though it may leave Mr. Merton's character uninjured, *must* be prejudicial to you."

I was too keenly mortified to answer. Perhaps she thought her condescension had by this time been sufficiently exercised, or more probably, that Mr. Merton might remark her long absence from the drawing-room; for she now rose, and repeating a kind of apology for the liberty she had taken and a request that I would consider the hint she had given me to have been dictated only by the friendliest feeling, she left the room.

You may easily conceive my state of mind. Hot and miserable—dejected and indignant; so must I characterise my feelings. Young and innocent, and ignorant of the world and its ways as I was, I was still not so much of a simpleton as not to comprehend in its amplest significance the quality and nature of the gossip which her ladyship had hinted at.

How cruel! how false! Here was a moral society tossing its hands and turning up its eyes and crying out upon me in language which for the first time put ideas into my head that could never have found their way there but for these Pharisees. Was it not enough that I was a young girl without friends and without a home to which I could return, having to work for a living and depending upon my honest name for my chances of support, but these slanderous wretches must lay hold on my character and drag it through the mire of their own imaginations, doing me the yet more grievous, and perhaps irreparable, injury of making me look upon the world as cruel and false?

Thus I cried to myself, and probably aloud; for I had lost my self-control, and hardly knew whether I spoke my thoughts or not.

What could Lady Callender's object be in coming to tell me things so bitter to hear? Was her visit really occasioned by concern—by friendship—by the "appeal of my friendliness" as she had phrased it?

I could not deceive myself: this mission had been undertaken by her out of no feeling of friendship or sentiment. There was nothing for it but to conclude that she wanted

to get me out of the house. Why? did she think that I stood in her daughter's way? Was she jealous of me? Did she fancy that I had some influence over Mr. Merton and might persuade him against marrying Miss Callender? Doubtless there was some such reason as this at the bottom of the "disinterested" anxiety she felt for my character. But what it was I hardly paused to consider; the speculation was too trivial to draw my attention from the more momentous questions which her hint had set me asking myself: whether she had spoken the truth? whether my name and character were supplying the people of Ashleigh with matter for shrugs and winks? If so the gossip must be stopped. And even if no such gossip had been bandied, still the danger that Lady Callender had pointed out was a palpable one, and the remedy to stop it was the only remedy to obviate its contingency—I must seek another place.

Hard alternative! bitter resolution! Ashleigh Manor was the only home I had ever known, for it was desecration to apply the word home to my aunt's house. At Ashleigh Manor I had found friends; one who had loved and one who still valued me. Here had

my mind had its chief growth; at my aunt's it had been crippled and stultified by the loveless conditions which surrounded it, by the petty tyrannies which teased and tormented it. But in Mr. Merton I had met with an original, a powerful understanding; it had impressed me; it had instructed me; it had charmed me into loving him. At Ashleigh Manor I had never been trampled upon. A sense of equality had been imparted by Mr. Merton's treatment of me; and though it never could cause me to trespass beyond the line which my good sense had chalked as the limits of my position, it nevertheless solaced, refreshed and, I may say, dignified me in my own estimation. Association, too, had spun its fine and spiritual web and connected me to Ashleigh Manor by the mesh of loving memories. I had peopled the house with interests which were individual and appealing to me, and endeared the scenes which custom had made familiar. But above all, bitter was the thought of having to leave the man I loved; whom it was my joy to see and hear; who grew dearer to me in proportion as other interests made wider yet the intervals that separated us.

Was it imperative that I should go? Was

it necessary that I should heed the cruel gossip of strangers; or, presuming that such gossip had no existence outside Lady Callender's brain, that I should make haste to leave a situation which, now that the hint had been given me, I believed must sooner or later challenge comment?

Such were the thoughts that, for a whole week following my conversation with Lady Callender, worried and tormented me. Sometimes I was impelled to go straight to Mr. Merton, acquaint him with her ladyship's view of our relations and tell him I must go. But no sooner would the resolution be formed than it vanished. How could I repeat Lady Callender's "suggestion?" Would he not scorn me for the prudery which could yet be prurient enough to avow its motive? Night after night I would lie awake tormented with a determination to tell Mr. Merton in the morning that it was my intention to leave him; but when the morning came, the resolve had disappeared. What excuse could I make to him? Unless I told him the truth how ungrateful, how almost despicable, I should appear in his eyes! He, at least, would hardly fail to remember the many times I had thanked him for his kindness to me; and what

would he think of such a return? Perhaps he would chill me with coldness, break me down with contempt, consider me no better than a servant, and assure me that since I was tired of my place, I was privileged to depart at any moment.

Yet in the end the hundred obstacles which sentiment had piled in the way of my leaving Ashleigh Manor were overcome by the disgust and aversion with which I reflected upon the rumour that was probably current amongst Mr. Merton's friends; and I rose one morning with the fixed intention of speaking to Mr. Merton as soon as I should meet him.

It happened, however, that on that morning he was indisposed with a cold which detained him in his room until the day was far advanced. And meanwhile, as though my life were under the direction of a guiding spirit whose pleasure it was to marshal events into coincidences, the following unexpected incident befell me.

I was downstairs giving some directions to one of the servants, when a footman came and said that there was a gentleman in the drawing-room who wished to see me.

A gentleman wishing to see *me* was something so totally unlooked for and surprising,

that instead of going at once to the drawing-room and thus satisfying my curiosity, I began to question the footman, much in the same way that people study the handwriting on an envelope in their anxiety to know who the letter is from, instead of taking out the enclosure and reading the signature.

"What was the gentleman's name?"

The man apologised; it had escaped his memory; it sounded like Woodman; but the gentleman gave no card, and spoke thick. I asked for the gentleman's description; but nobody that I had ever met corresponded with the portrait the footman drew. I went upstairs and entered the drawing-room.

A short middle-aged man sat nervously on the edge of the sofa, hat in hand, surveying the room with mingled admiration and astonishment. On seeing me he stood up, and gave a profound, old-fashioned bow, and inquired if my name was Miss Malcolmson. I replied that it was, desired him to be seated, and took a chair facing him. I had never seen the man before, and wondered what his business could be.

"I must introduce myself to you," he began, "as Mr. Woodward, solicitor, of L——. It was my intention to have acquainted you by letter with the news I purport now to relate;

but I had business to transact at Ashleigh—one of my clients residing here for his health having summoned me—and I thought I might kill two birds with one stone by calling on you. In brief, I have to inform you that your aunt, Mrs. Wellwood, is dead, and that she has bequeathed to you the whole of her property, which consists of the sum of five thousand pounds, invested in sound securities, together with her furniture, &c., all of which are at your disposal."

"Mrs. Wellwood dead!" I exclaimed; "and her son?"

"Dead," answered he.

"But I left them both well eighteen months or so ago," I said, aghast at the news.

"Ah, madam, a great deal may happen in eighteen months. Mr. Henry Wellwood's death was, I regret to say, entirely owing to his own folly. He had acquired a sad habit of intemperance in drink; and one night—it must be surely nine months ago—he was drinking with some friends of his in an upper room at the Bull Inn, which you may remember,"—I nodded,—"when the company being pretty far gone in liquor, one of them wagered that there was not a man in the room who had the courage to jump from the window into the

road. By the evidence that was given at the inquest, it was shown that Mr. Wellwood closed with the bet, at once jumped up, and before he could be stayed, sprang into the road. He fell upon the pavement, and lay there a dead man."

"Good heaven, what a death!"

"As you may believe, it was a terrible shock to Mrs. Wellwood. She fretted so much that her health gave way, and she died ten days ago."

"You bring me bad news, Mr. Woodward."

"Excuse me, but I hardly thought it would affect you very deeply; for I judge from the terms of the will, that you did not live very happily with the Wellwoods. I will have a draft of the will made on my return and forwarded to you; and from it you will find that the terms the testatrix uses in bequeathing her property suggests rather an act of reparation than one of kindness."

I was too much stirred by the news of these deaths, to think at that moment on the piece of fortune that had befallen me. I could hardly credit, indeed, that those two persons whom I had left but the other day were dead. In life I had disliked them bitterly, and I think I had reason. They had behaved with

great inhumanity to me; and after I had left their house, I daresay neither of them had ever given me a thought. Yet now that they were dead—so suddenly and under circumstances so distressing—I found their memory almost appealing. Grieve I could not; but the news gave me a shock, and made me for the time gloomy.

I asked Mr. Woodward many questions about the town in which I had been reared. There seemed something odd in these renewals of memories, which during the months I had passed at Ashleigh Manor, had as effectually faded off my memory as if the things they represented had never been. He told me a dark tale of my cousin Henry's doings previous to his death; and I recalled with a shudder that this dissolute man had wished to make me his wife. He then entered into minute details concerning the will, and told me that he should be happy to receive my instructions respecting the disposal of the furniture. I replied that I was so utterly ignorant on such matters that I should be glad to take his advice.

"The furniture," said he, "is very good, and at a rough guess I should value the contents of the house at about six hundred

pounds. The question is, do you want this furniture? if so, it could be packed and forwarded to your order."

"I may want it; but to tell you the truth, the news you have brought has so surprised me that it is impossible to think with clearness."

"If you will take my advice, Miss Malcolmson, you will not part with it. I presume you do not propose to continue in the profession you have adopted; and as you will require a house to live in, you will find this furniture of great use."

"Very well; I will consider and let you know."

He took out his pocket-book and scratched his name and address on a blank leaf which he tore out and handed to me.

"I shall be happy to place my services at your disposal in any way you may command. If you desire to retain the furniture, you might leave it where it is for the present. I could easily let the house for you; and the rent you will receive will discharge the rent of the house unfurnished, and yield you a surplus."

This I thought a good suggestion, and so the matter was settled. After some further conversation in which he talked to me about

stocks and shares and dividends, he took his leave.

Fortune in fiction has an agreeable knack of smiling at opportune moments, of imparting its bounties just as the exigencies of the plot require their distribution. It is more niggardly in real life; and I think most people's experience goes to prove that the good that befals generally comes too late. You see, I consider an apology necessary for mentioning what is strictly a veracious incident; but which has so much the air of the dove-tailing of romance that I shall not be affronted at any criticism it may please you to make upon it. But how shall I better convince you that I am writing the truth than by assuring you that this windfall has nothing whatever to do with my story. I don't say that I did not put it to use in that other life of mine, about which you are to hear nothing; but in the life I am relating only to amuse and interest you—if I can—it did me no service whatever, led up to no surprises, created no situations, produced no incidents—which is the best testimony I, as a novelist, can bear to its truthfulness.

It was natural enough that I should fall into a deep reverie after Mr. Woodward had

left me, for what makes us more thoughtful than money? It occurred to me that I could make this two hundred a-year a good excuse for leaving Ashleigh Manor. But would it be a gracious excuse? Would not the claims Mr. Merton must know he had upon my gratitude make him think me selfish and cold to quit his house, when by stopping I could contribute to his comfort as no mere housekeeper could? He was to be married. Was I sure? It was a rumour, and I had been taught how far rumours were to be relied on. Loving him as I did I felt that I *could* not leave him with the true motive of my going undisclosed. Do you think that I would have gone away because I had had two hundred a-year left me? Would you separate from the man you love for two hundred a-year? I could have no other reason then for quitting Ashleigh Manor but Lady Callender's "hint." If I dared not reveal the true motive to Mr. Merton, I ought to have too much courage to give him a false one. These considerations made me pause; and when I met him in the afternoon I had made up my mind to think the matter over yet again before speaking to him.

CHAPTER III.

I ACQUAINT MR. MERTON WITH MY RESOLUTION TO LEAVE ASHLEIGH MANOR.

IT took me some time—I mean some hours—to thoroughly understand that my aunt's legacy made me an independent woman for life. I mastered the idea at last, and in consequence felt about six inches taller. Two hundred a-year was opulence. With two hundred a-year I was a fortune. On two hundred a-year what might not be done?

How absolutely unexpected was all this money! Had anybody told me that there was a probability of my some day inheriting my aunt's fortune, I should have thought him mad. *She* who had always treated me badly, and even cruelly, to leave me the whole of her property! I should have thought that, rather than make me her heiress, she would have willed every penny of her money away to

charities. Had conscience worked the miracle? Yes; the will of which I afterwards received a copy, stated this plainly enough. What she had dictated to the scribe who drew up the document was as good as an apology to me for her behaviour. She had as good as driven me out into the world, friendless, inexperienced, and helpless, to strive singlehanded with life, and, for aught she could tell, to perish miserably in the unequal combat. Such a memory would haunt her like a ghost amid the gloomy solitude of her closing days. I was grateful to her for remembering me; but I could not feel sorry for her. Her name awoke too many bitter recollections to allow me to pity her for the dark sorrows which had rendered gloomy the last months of her existence. I could not, indeed, have desired fate to avenge me so savagely; but the blow having been struck, I could not grieve.

But even if I had been in anywise disposed to fret over the loss of these relations, there were certain deep considerations engrossing my attention just then which would have left me little leisure for tears. I had paused in my resolution to tell Mr. Merton I must leave him; but that pause was only the suspension, not the *extinction*, of my resolve.

I cannot describe the horror with which I would think of people making the remarks that Lady Callender had spoken to me about. My sensitiveness was stung by the thought. I felt that were I to remain at Ashleigh Manor, I should hate to show my face in the town. I should slink by Mr. Merton's acquaintances with burning cheeks; nay, the very servants might catch up the wicked rumour, and whisper together about me in the kitchen.

It was on the fourth morning after I had been called upon by Mr. Woodward that I received his promised copy of the will and a letter, in which he stated his belief that he should be very shortly able to let the house. These letters having been read by me, lay upon the breakfast-table, and were seen by Mr. Merton when he entered the room. As I had never before received a letter since I had been at Ashleigh Manor, I could account for the curious gaze he fastened upon the missives.

"That is a formidable-looking document," he said, with what appeared to me a very uneasy smile, indicating the will, which was engrossed outside in a lawyer's clerk's handwriting.

"It is from a lawyer, sir."

"A lawyer!" he exclaimed, raising his eyebrows. "Lawyers are dangerous people to have anything to do with. Have you been asking advice?"

"No, sir."

"I am tolerably well versed in law, and could probably answer any questions you might have to ask as well as a lawyer. You will find me cheap. I should not charge you for my opinion."

"I have not been asking any lawyer for his opinion. I received a visit last Tuesday from a country solicitor, who informed me that my aunt was dead, and that I had inherited her property. He promised to send me a draft of the will, and this is it."

"Oh, is that all! I hope I may congratulate you on having inherited a large fortune?"

"Two hundred a-year, sir."

"I wish it were two thousand. Still, two hundred a-year will make you independent."

"It must sound a ridiculous sum to you; but our ideas of wealth are comparative. To me five thousand pounds is a fortune."

"You quite mistake. Two hundred a-year is not a ridiculous sum to me. I would exchange my income with yours to-morrow,

and yield you possession of Ashleigh Manor if, with the exchange, it were possible to transfer the memories which make my fortune insipid. By the way, how came you not to mention your friend's visit to me before?"

"I did not think it would interest you."

"Why should you believe that? Are you not my friend? And yet just now I told you that I would transfer my memories to you if I could. Is that a friendly remark? You may suspect my sincerity when you hear me express such wishes."

"You need not tell me that you are my friend, sir. You have been more than a friend to me since I have been in your house; and whatever my future may be, I shall never cease to think with gratitude on the kindness, the tenderness, the cordial respect you have invariably shown me. Thanks to you, sir, I have been always able to preserve my self-respect as a lady. You have permitted me to look upon Ashleigh Manor as my home: and the house will be consecrated in my memory as a scene in which I have passed some of the happiest hours of my life."

"You gratify me by speaking like this, Miss Malcolmson. But what kindness have I done you that was equal to your deserts?

You were my poor Laura's well-loved friend; you have been my faithful companion, and, in some instances, my adviser; shown me deeper sympathy than I could deem it possible for such a gruff, rugged nature as mine to excite; and have exhibited a quality of constancy which, in this world of shifting humours and capricious infidelities, is too rare not to be admirable. But come now, you speak as if you meant to leave me. That is not your intention, I hope?"

I was silent.

"Is it really your wish to go?" he asked earnestly.

"My services will not be of use to you much longer, sir," I exclaimed, tremulously.

"Pray, why?"

"I hear that you are to be married."

"Married! To whom?"

"To Miss Callender."

He laughed.

"Who is your informant, Miss Malcolmson?"

"Rumour, sir."

"So I am being discussed by the gossips, am I? Do you believe that I am going to marry Miss Callender?"

"I will believe it if you say it."

He laughed again.

"It is extraordinary what Rumour will not assert. Really, your information puts the idea of marriage into my head. Why should I not marry Miss Callender? Is she not a handsome girl?"

"Yes."

"Is she not clever, witty, sarcastic—just the sort of woman for a man of my melancholic temperament? Sprightly and diverting, and capable of drawing me away from my morose reveries? Husband and wife ought to fit each other like words and music. I won't be so conceited as to compare myself to a poem; but don't you think the rude rhymes of my nature would run well alongside the melody of Miss Callender's character?"

"You are the best judge, sir."

"Don't say that. I want your opinion. I know you have formed an estimate of Miss Callender's nature. You once summed her up in two or three felicitous adjectives. I want to hear more about her from you. You will allow that she is clever and handsome?"

"If you please."

"You will not answer me straightforwardly. Be it so. Do you like Lady Callender?"

"No."

"You disappoint me. I should have thought that everybody who could overlook one or two trifling deformities, must like Lady Callender. Such a mixture of shrewdness and sentiment, worldliness and piety, sympathy and selfishness ought exactly to hit your taste. But you see how a man may err in his theories."

"Do *you* like Lady Callender?"

"How can I help liking a lady who takes such an interest in me as she does? It is gratifying to be flattered, is it not? to be condoled with, to find everything you say punctuated with a note of admiration. You do not know how deeply her ladyship can sympathise."

I hardly knew whether he was ironical or serious. It was so much his habit, even when serious, to speak in a semi-bantering tone, that I was never sure of his sarcasm.

"But I have to consider her," he went on, "in the light of a mother-in-law. I cannot but think she would adorn that position. The general fault of the mother-in-law is, what I may call a one-eyed sympathy. She is commonly a great deal too much in favour of her own child. But judging from the lively interest Lady Callender takes in me, I think I might guarantee myself an immunity from

those reproaches and suggestions and acrid words, which most men's wives' mothers consider it their business to make. For instance, she has told me over and over again that she considers me very kind-hearted and amiable and obliging. If, therefore, she has any conscience at all she could never charge me with the want of these virtues hereafter. I am considering her only in the light of the regular mother-in-law, who, as a rule, loves her daughter's husband so little that it doesn't signify to her what manner of wrong she lays to his account, providing it be a big one."

"I have but little knowledge of these matters," I said; "but I can't help thinking that you will find Lady Callender a closer resemblance to the typical mother-in-law one reads and hears of, than you conceive."

"What makes you think so?"

"I have my theories about her ladyship. . . . . But you will think me impertinent in being so candid about your friends."

"How can I think you impertinent for answering the questions I ply you with? Come now, draw aside the formal veil that conceals your frankness, and let me hear your theories of the lady whom Rumour has made my mamma-in-law to be."

"There it is, sir. If she were not likely to become a connexion of yours, I should have less reluctance to answer your questions."

"Well, imagine for the nonce that she is not likely to become a connexion, and talk to me under that impression."

"Then," said I, colouring up, but nevertheless determined that he should know the truth since he insisted upon hearing it, "my opinion of Lady Callender is that she is a very ambitious, designing woman. I believe that there is no flattery she would not descend to; no tricks she would not play; no deceit she would not practise, to achieve her end; which is, to see her daughter well married. Is the ambition innocent? it may be; but I don't think the acts she stoops to to gain her purpose are."

"Upon my word, you make me feel quite crestfallen. Here have I been pluming myself in the belief that all her ladyship's compliments to me were sincere—her sympathy honest—her admiration genuinely provoked. Now you tell me she is—a humbug! and you have as good as implied the motive of her cozening."

"I will do more than imply it—I will name it. You *will* have me be frank."

"Let's hear."

"She wants you to marry her daughter."

"Well, where's the harm? You have just now called that kind of ambition innocent."

I was silent in the intensely disagreeable sense of discomfort which always attends the impression that you have overtalked yourself. I caught him looking at me earnestly, and presently he said:—

"Is it your intention to leave me because I am going to be married to Miss Callender?"

"No, sir."

"No! you implied as much just now," he exclaimed, with something resembling an accent of disappointment in his voice.

"You misunderstood me," I replied, struggling with my feelings, for it seemed to me that the disclosure of my real motive was imminent.

"Why do you wish to leave me?" he asked tenderly.

I turned pale, fidgeting with the corner of my pocket-handkerchief, but incapable of reply.

There came a pause that lasted some moments. When he next spoke there was an audible tremor in his accents.

"Is the life you are leading here too dull for you?"

"No, sir."

Again there fell a silence. I glanced at him and observed that his face was singularly grave. There was even upon his forehead the shadow of a frown, which I knew from experience only gathered there when his mind was deeply agitated; yet his voice was still tender as he asked:—

"Am I to suppose that the money you have had left to you, has determined you to abandon your avocation?"

"It is not the money that makes me wish to leave you," I replied, strangely stirred by his manner.

"It is not because of my rumoured engagement to Miss Callender; it is not because you are dull; it is not because of the money you have inherited. What is your motive?" he inquired in a deepened tone, tinged with a barely perceptible colouring of irritation.

How could I tell him? All my instincts recoiled from a confession which was so dishonouring to him, so humiliating to me. I looked up at him appealingly. I would not utter a falsehood; I shrunk from affirming the truth.

He left his chair and leaned against the mantelpiece. There was something in the expression of his face singularly akin to the look it had worn that day when my reference to the Angels' Court had provoked him into an explosion of anger. He bit his lip, keeping his gaze fixed on me, but not fully; his head was hung, and his eyes sought mine askance.

"Is it not in your power to be explicit?" he exclaimed at last, after a long silence. "Is it your pleasure to pique my curiosity? Your reserve is unaccountable."

"Bear with me, sir," I entreated, painfully dispirited by his suppressed irritation.

"You are not kind, you are not treating me well, Miss Malcolmson. You tell me that you have been happy since you have been at Ashleigh Manor, and flatter me by accrediting me with a share in the creation of your happiness. You wish to leave me now —abruptly, and you will not condescend to explain your reason for going. This is ungracious—ungenerous—undeserved."

These words expressed a different meaning from what they appeared to convey. Judged literally, they implied a reproach; but judged with reference to the tone in which he uttered

them, they implied only an irritable annoyance at my reticence. So accurately did I perceive their real sense, that I answered promptly:

"When you hear the truth, you will understand the motive of my reserve. Lady Callender will tell you why I leave you."

"Lady Callender!" he exclaimed. "What has she to do with you?"

"Nothing; but about a fortnight ago she came to me in the library, and contrived to let me know, in language too unequivocal for me to misinterpret, that if I valued my character, it would be impossible for me to remain any longer in this house."

The truth was told! It had escaped me. The tears rushed into my eyes, and I hid my face in my hands.

"In the name of heaven, what is the meaning of this riddle?" he exclaimed, violently.

I faltered out under the protection of my hands:

"She told me that my name was discussed by the gossips here—that my position was a delicate one—that—that——" impossible to go on.

Raising my eyes anon, I saw that he understood what I meant. The hard expression

had melted out of his face, and he was gazing at me tenderly and reproachfully.

"And this is your motive for leaving me?"

"Yes, sir."

"You would remain with me, solace me with your society, cheer me with your friendly ministrations, if you could; but gossip overpowers your inclinations, and compels you to leave me?"

"I cannot help it," I sobbed. "I never knew how cruel and wicked the world was, until Lady Callender taught me."

"Do you believe what Lady Callender says?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you would not take my word that her statements are pure invention?"

"She addressed me as a friend. She told me she was a woman who had seen much of the world. It was her wish, she said, to put me on my guard."

"And she advised you to leave my house?"

"Yes."

"Do you believe in her good intentions? accept her views as the truth?"

"I don't believe in her good intentions, because she is a proud woman, and not likely

to stoop to take an interest in such as I. But I consider her views just."

"You fear scandal?"

"Yes."

"It is proper you should. But do you sincerely believe that there is anything in your residence here to excite scandal even in minds the most corrupt and impure?"

"If I did not fear there was, I should not wish to go."

"Be advised by your own instincts. What do they tell you? Do they suggest that you have become the subject of the neighbours' small-talk?"

"I am so ignorant of the world and its ways, that I never could have conceived myself doing anything that would challenge gossip. But I have taken what Lady Callender told me very seriously to heart. I have made, thanks to her, the discovery that the world is a very bad world, and that the purest innocence cannot escape the foul whisper of calumny."

"Lady Callender should feel gratified with the result. I don't know whether it is a very honourable achievement to poison a young heart, but those who attempt this unclean work would naturally desire their experiments

to prove successful. I think Lady Callender should be informed that she has succeeded in jaundicing your mental eyes. And you believe what she says?"

"I do."

"Would you believe it if I could prove that her professions of friendship are not so sincere as she tried to represent them to you?"

I looked up.

"That being desirous," he continued, "for a reason I think I can guess, to see your back turned upon Ashleigh Manor, she had set her ingenuity to work to expel you."

"I have extorted a very unpalatable confession from you," he went on, seeing that I did not answer, "and it is only fair to requite candour by candour. Suppose, then, I tell you that this Lady Callender, who, in your imagination, seems to be a very proud and mighty personage, is jealous of you—you, Miss Malcolmson, the humble governess."

"Jealous of *me?*"

"To be sure women will sometimes take the most unconscionable notions into their heads, especially if they happen to be proud and mighty. You would hardly suspect that so fine a woman as Lady Callender could to deign imagine for a moment that her bril-

liant Constance was likely to be eclipsed by such a very humble shadow as a governess casts ?"

I turned very red in the face, and hung my head. I knew what he meant.

"I don't mean to say that I am quite guiltless of exciting her ladyship's apprehensions," he went on; "it is possible that at times, inspired by many agreeable memories, I may have spoken of you with a warmth such as her ladyship's cold nature might hardly deem possible to friendship. But I am guiltless to the extent of having been quite unconscious that my language was ever likely to enflame my lady's imagination and set her ransacking her worldly head for some mode of comfortably conveying you out of the house. Let the devil have his due. Her ladyship's stratagem only misses being brilliant by proving unsuccessful. Really, there is something Machiavelian about her ruse. I have no doubt that she counted upon your modesty being sufficiently active to expel you, whilst it would prohibit you from revealing to me the motive of your going. I am sorry to see so much talent misapplied : especially in a woman whom Rumour has dedicated to me as a mother-in-law. One can't help having a fellow-feeling with even prospective relations."

He laughed loudly; and, returning to the table, drank off the cup of tea which he had left.

"How do things appear to you now, Miss Malcolmson?"

I was too much embarrassed to reply clearly.

"I—don't know, sir. I am pained and surprised—and yet——"

"And yet what?"

"I never suspected Lady Callender's intentions to have been sincere. But—but——"

"Well?"

"The meanness of her intentions does not qualify the truth."

"Oh, I see. You have made up your mind to leave me. I will say no more. But, at least, be candid: after what I have said, you can no longer feign the motive of your going to be the motive you gave me."

"Indeed, sir, I leave you from no other motive. It is bitter to be driven out of a house which one loves because of the kindness one has met with in it. I leave you with deep regret — with sincere reluctance —with unspeakable gratitude for your past favours. But I know my duty—I *must* go."

"When?"

"I must study your convenience."

"That means you will give me time to look out for another housekeeper."

"Yes, sir."

"You are truly considerate; but I must not keep you lingering, to serve my purpose, when every moment your exquisite sensitiveness feels the thong—the well-knotted thong—of Scandal falling upon it. If you wish, you can go to-morrow."

"Very well, sir."

"You do not speak as though you felt the 'sincere reluctance' you just now told me about."

"You cannot think me glad to go?" I exclaimed, with the tears gathering.

"Don't you know—you should by this time—that I am a cynic?" he answered, coldly; "and that it is the business of cynicism to attribute very nauseous and unwholesome motives to actions which may seem quite lustrous with honour, or truth, or any other worthiness? I began life twenty years ago by believing in everybody. But as I advanced in years I found scepticism harden into infidelity. How I came by my scepticism I don't clearly recollect: I will not say it

to my wife's account, for I was a sceptic before I knew her. Your quitting me will not soften my cynicism—so much the better. If a man gets a notion into his brain, it is best that it should be confirmed. I can't quarrel with a person for justifying my theory of the world's insincerity. It is an idea that has long been in my mind, and it is a relief, if not a pleasure, to feel that the idea is a truthful one. Perhaps cynicism is the best armour human nature can don in its conflict with men and brothers. There was a little place just over my heart, Miss Malcolmson, in my cynical armour, which wanted stopping or mending—a hole which made me still vulnerable. Your hand has given the finishing touch to the complete suit, and I beg to thank you for the favour."

Hard as his language was, it was made more bitter to hear by his tone. I felt, however, that enough had been said. I knew in my heart that my motive for leaving him was an honest and a good motive; nor could the doubt he had expressed of my sincerity persuade me into believing that he truly distrusted me. Let his cynicism be all that he professed it, his perceptions were still sound, and keen enough to recognise the real exist-

ence of the gratitude I felt; and that would oblige him to know that I left him sorrowfully, and only because it was my duty to go.

He paced the room when he had done speaking, and continued walking some time without uttering a word. I should have left had I not feared that the action would seem a kind of impertinency. He looked at me presently, and said:

"You have not told me when you mean to go."

"You suggested to-morrow."

"To-morrow—very well. At what hour?"

"At any time—it does not matter."

"Where will you go? To Ashleigh?"

"Yes, sir, and remain there until I have settled my plans."

"Don't forget that I owe you some money. Come to me at the library at four, or thereabouts, to-morrow afternoon, and we will calculate the sum that is due. My carriage is at your service afterwards to take you to Ashleigh."

So saying, he marched out.

I don't suppose there was a woman in the whole of England, at that particular time, more abjectly miserable than I. I felt as the

ghost of a person may be supposed to feel, who, though in life he was perfectly happy, nevertheless destroyed himself in the conviction that his happiness was an insult to heaven. I had, in a sense, committed suicide. Under the impression that my character was being vilified by the malevolent gossips of Ashleigh, I had voluntarily, and with my own hand, murdered my peace of mind: I had banished myself from the society of the man I loved: I had torn from my heart associations which gave a particular brightness to my past, and which afforded me rich compensation for the melancholy hours I had spent under my aunt's roof.

But could I help it? Was I not doing rightly? Though a feeling of great disgust had been excited in me by the hint Mr. Merton had given me of Lady Callender's object; still, her views did not appear to me the less correct. Rebel as I might against the conclusion, I was forced to see that an indecorous and imaginative world might and *would* see something suspicious in a young girl like myself residing alone with Mr. Merton. At any sacrifice of feeling, my good name must be snatched out of the mouths of the curs. It might break my heart to leave Ashleigh

Manor; but I believed the world would also break my heart if I remained.

There was one passage in the conversation I had had with Mr. Merton, which, but for his manner, might have made me very reflective, and even inclined me to a species of fatuity. I refer to his explanation of Lady Callender's motive. To be told by him that Lady Callender was jealous of me, was indeed to persuade me that he had given her ladyship reason. Yet he had contrived that no such impression should be conveyed. He had made me believe that Lady Callender's jealousy was entirely owing to her own greediness—to her voracious eagerness to keep every one away from the man she wanted to devour. I had not traced in his language to me the faintest colouring of any other sentiment than friendship. Even his most tender tones were such as a regretful friend would use.

This passage, then, made no impression on me; but I will now refer to another that impressed me very strongly. When I had told him of my intention to leave, but had faltered and hesitated in assigning a motive, he had been agitated to a degree for which I could not find anything in my words to account.

What was the cause of his agitation? Why had he manifested so much irritation? The familiar shadow of mystery which had enshrouded him for so long a time deepened as I mused. He had shown a curious pertinacity in wresting the reason of my going from him. What reason had he suspected? What reason could I have which should disorder and vex him and darken his brow to imagine? Did the delusion which I considered the source of his melancholy, and of which I had indulged in the most extravagant theories to account for the nature, involve *me* in its sable folds? Was *I* in any way identified with his morbid abstractions? Sometimes I had felt—but so vaguely that imagination itself could scarce realise the delicate and intangible bond—that I was connected with him by some shadowy, subtle link, forged by the very mystery which shrouded his character. On such occasions, I would conceive that the condescension, nay, the tender courtesy, that had won my heart, and taught me to love him, was but an extorted tribute to some power in me, unknown to myself, but witnessed and submitted to by him. Might not I, therefore, justly consider that his delusion extended to me? What was there about me—a girl, pretty and lady-

like if you will, but not more so than fifty others he might easily have found—to win from him the confidence with which he had honoured me, to have caused him invariably to address me in the tone of one who recognises an equal, to make him even ambitious of my good opinion, manifest so irritable an anxiety to learn my motive for leaving him, and so flattering a disposition to induce me to remain?

But, as these pages have already assured you, this was not the only riddle I had tried to solve; and my previous failures to conjecture the truth made me speculate but languidly upon the last conundrum that had been offered.

CHAPTER IV.

AN UNEXPECTED INCIDENT.

ONCE, many months before, I had risen from my bed in the full conviction that I should never pass another night at Ashleigh Manor. That conviction had proved false, but I could not conceive that the conviction with which I left my bedroom on the morning following the day when I had told Mr. Merton I must leave him, would deceive me. I was careful to hide all traces of the tears I had been weak enough to shed on retiring to rest; for, now that I was veritably about to leave Ashleigh Manor, I did not want Mr. Merton to speculate on any apparent inconsistencies in my behaviour, lest he should hit upon the true secret, and discover that I loved him. It was too late now for him to find that secret out. Better I should carry it away with me, and

leave behind me only the memories which best befitted the position I had occupied.

I met him at breakfast. His manner was cold, calm, courteous. He made no reference to our conversation; indeed I should have imagined that he had forgotten it, had he not on leaving the table, said, significantly—

"You will not fail to keep your appointment with me this afternoon."

I went about my duties low-heartedly. I daresay the servants remarked with surprise the unusual suggestion of tears in the voice and eyes of one who was so habitually cheerful and light-spirited.

Mr. Merton went out at twelve o'clock, and did not return to luncheon. I was glad not to see him. My resolution was of a very wax-like character, hard enough if left alone in the cool atmosphere of my will, but likely to melt under the warmth of any particular kindness from Mr. Merton.

I went into the grounds after lunch. The day was gray and bleak, in keeping with my mood. A high wind swept through the trees, making a continuous thunder among the almost bare branches. My head ached painfully, and, nipping as the air was, I removed my hat to receive the full current on my

throbbing temples. I looked at the house, standing rugged and gloomy and grand, under the gray heavens. I gazed at the windows of the Red Room, from which I had so often watched the crows circling over the topmost branches of the trees, and invented little fables about them for poor Laura's amusement. The whole panorama of the time I had passed at Ashleigh Manor unfolded itself, and I lived in fancy for the last time in scenes which were to be as dead to me shortly as if they had been less than dreams.

I lingered in the grounds some time, and then returned to the house to begin the work of packing, which, I think, even more than the saying farewell, makes defined and poignant the sense of departure. Whilst I was thus occupied I saw the hour was approaching for my appointment with Mr. Merton. I changed my dress, so as to be in readiness to leave after I had parted with him—though how did my heart sink, how did my spirits tremble, at the prospect of that parting! I felt that I should never be able to say "Goodbye." If he spoke gently to me—pressed me to stop—how bitter would be the trial! Yet stop I could not—I dared not. Even whilst

I had sate alone at the luncheon-table, I had thought of the strange anomaly that must be suggested to those unacquainted with Mr. Merton's habits, of his *housekeeper* sitting with him at his table, and conversing with him with the familiarity of an equal. Lady Callender had, indeed, spoken to some purpose. Though all my heart clung to Ashleigh Manor, though all the fibres of my cherished fancies were intertwined about it, and were to be sundered only by being snapped and broken; yet the tormenting thought of dishonour which Lady Callender had suggested must have expelled me as ruthlessly as if some material hand had grasped and turned me out.

Having changed my dress, I descended the gallery staircase. In doing so, I heard the hall-bell peal. I hastened forward to reach the library before the hall door was opened. I found Mr. Merton standing with his back to the fire-place. There was an expression of mingled merriment and contempt on his face, which contrasted strangely with his paleness and its indication of melancholy. He was smiling rather bitterly to himself when I entered; but the harsh gleam of mirth faded off his lips when he saw me,

and his features grew composed and even stern.

"Take that chair, Miss Malcolmson. You are punctual," he exclaimed, looking at the clock. "Did I not hear the hall-bell ring just now?"

"Yes, sir."

The smile again flitted on his lips.

"I hope we are not going to be troubled with visitors—they will delay our tête-à-tête; and you are in a hurry to leave."

"I am not in so great a hurry as you suggest, sir."

"What, do you repent? Do you wish to stop?"

"No; but an hour sooner or later makes little difference at such a time."

"I don't suppose it will take us very long to reckon up the sum that is owing to you. Perhaps it might save time if I were to give you a——"

The door opened; a footman looked in and said, "Lady Callender and Miss Callender are in the drawing-room, sir."

"How odd that they should call at this moment!" exclaimed Mr. Merton to me. "A thought strikes me. I challenged the accuracy of the motive you gave me yesterday for

wishing to leave; and I am still sceptical as to your sincerity. Suppose I ask Lady Callender and her daughter to join us here? Would you mind if I questioned her before you, and ascertained from her own lips that your reason for leaving is the reason you have given?"

"I am sorry," I answered, colouring up, "that you should think it necessary to prove my assurance true before you accept it. Do as you will, sir. I am not afraid to meet Lady Callender."

"Very well," he said, with a queer smile; and he left the room.

I was surprised by his rudeness in doubting my truth to my very face; even if the remark had escaped him through the irritation my resolution to leave caused him, I thought he might at least have had the politeness to soften his bluntness with some kind of apology. The effect of his behaviour, however, was useful to me as a counter-irritant. I felt that the trial of leave-taking would not be so severe as I had dreaded, if he treated me in this blunt fashion.

Meanwhile my heart began to beat rather quickly, in anticipation of her ladyship's entrance. What would he say to her? What would she answer? What would Miss Cal-

lender think? Might it not end in a quarrel? No—her ladyship would scarcely permit that.

Mr. Merton hardly kept me waiting three minutes. He threw open the door, ushering in Lady Callender and her daughter, followed, and offered them chairs.

I fancy that her ladyship was rather surprised to see me. She bowed graciously, and Miss Callender gave me her hand. I was quiet and restrained. There was an intelligence, a light, in Mr. Merton's eyes, which made me conceive that something unexpected was to happen. I took a firm grasp of my energies, and sate self-collected and prepared.

"I have thanked you once, Lady Callender," said Mr. Merton, "for being so punctual; and I must repeat my thanks to you before Miss Malcolmson, that she may know you are so obliging as to be here by appointment."

The two ladies looked from me to Mr. Merton, from Mr. Merton to me.

"The truth is, Miss Malcolmson leaves me to-day. Your ladyship is, I am sure, tender-hearted enough to conceive that the parting between good and true friends is among the saddest of the sad incidents of

life. Miss Callender will, of course, agree with me."

"Oh, I thoroughly agree with you, Mr. Merton," exclaimed Lady Callender effusively. "I know nothing more sad—for the time being."

"For the time being, no doubt. Happily we are so constituted that the most painful calamities affect us only for the time being. I part with Miss Malcolmson with deep regret. Miss Callender may perhaps wish me to justify a sentiment which seems so entirely opposed to the character of cynicism with which she has charged me."

"Indeed not," cried the young lady warmly. "I think it is the most natural thing in the world that Miss Malcolmson's going should cause you regret. I don't think I should like you at all if it didn't," she added, with the coquettish air of familiarity a girl imagines herself privileged to adopt towards the man of whose affections she thinks herself secure.

"Still it is requisite that I should justify my regret," he replied, looking at her with a smile which was somehow deprived of its mirth by the expression in his eyes. "Miss Malcolmson was my little one's true and loving friend.

Many tender memories of the dead cluster around her; and, Lady Callender, you must know that the memories which spring from the grave have a very consecrating power. If Miss Malcolmson's only claims upon me were my poor child's love, your kind heart, I am sure, would consider them sufficient to make me very sorry to part with her. But they are not her only claims by many. You will excuse me from attempting the catalogue. I refrain from no want of memory; her presence will excuse my omission."

Lady Callender looked at me, and then stole a glance at her daughter. She had evidently no more notion than I of what Mr. Merton's language was tending to. Miss Callender kept her eyes fixed on his face, and seemed deeply interested.

"Miss Callender, I am afraid that you are in a draught there. Will you not draw near the fire?"

She crossed the room and took a chair near him.

"I am glad, Lady Callender, that I have your sympathy. You know—and it is this knowledge which makes you so sympathetic—how hard it is to replace the loss of a friend. Miss Malcolmson came to live in this house

as my poor child's governess. She discharged her duties so faithfully that Laura died loving her as a sister. You would hardly need a higher illustration of Miss Malcolmson's fitness for her vocation?"

"No indeed," answered she, nodding towards me graciously.

"At my particular request she, after Laura's death, did me the great kindness to take charge of my house. She has done her work well. She has made herself essential to my comfort. She is respected and liked by the servants, who find a greater pleasure in obeying her than me. I think you will be equally pleased with this illustration of her fitness for a vocation quite different from that of governess?"

Again Lady Callender nodded. It struck me, looking at the expression in her face, that she imagined Mr. Merton wanted her to take me into her service, or claim her assistance in procuring me another place. Miss Callender eyed me furtively. I think she was getting tired of the long string of compliments Mr. Merton was making me.

"Now," said he, "I dare say you wonder why I should have asked you here to listen to me sounding Miss Malcolmson's praises.

My reason was, she affirms that the motive of her departure is owing entirely to you."

"To *you*, mamma!" cried Miss Callender.

Her ladyship turned a little pale, and found her chair uncomfortable.

"You know," he went on, "that I am afflicted with a very incredulous mind. I have taken, what I trust Miss Malcolmson will not consider the unpardonable liberty of questioning the sincerity of her motive. That motive she charges upon you. It appeared to me, indeed, so unreasonable, so improbable, that, at the risk of being thought ungentlemanly by her, I have ventured to invite you here that you may confirm or disprove her assertion."

"I have told you the truth, Mr. Merton," I said calmly, "and Lady Callender will bear me out."

Miss Callender was looking eagerly at Mr. Merton. Her eyes seemed wonderfully innocent and surprised; but I had not the least doubt that she was perfectly well acquainted with the conversation her mother had had with me.

"You hear what Miss Malcolmson says, Lady Callender."

"I think, Mr. Merton," answerd her ladyship, in a very hesitating voice, and growing

hot in the face, "that the subject is hardly—hardly one to be discussed in the presence—in the presence of my daughter."

"You did not consider Miss Malcolmson, Lady Callender."

"We were alone," said she, forcing a smile; for as I had suspected, she had no wish to quarrel.

"Oh, mamma," exclaimed Miss Callender, looking around her with her innocent eyes; "I am sure that there is nothing you would say to Miss Malcolmson which you would not wish me to hear."

"Well, Conny," answered her ladyship—and now I became the spectator of a little bit of tolerable acting—"I certainly did make one or two suggestions to Miss Malcolmson respecting her position here. I made them in good faith—confidentially, and from no motive whatever but the wish to put a young lady, so entirely innocent of the world as Miss Malcolmson is, on her guard against those wicked slanders which people in country places are so fond of circulating at the expense of their neighbours."

"But what did you tell Miss Malcolmson, mamma?"

"I have no wish to go into the subject,"

replied her ladyship, drawing herself up. "Miss Malcolmson has doubtless made Mr. Merton acquainted with the nature of my conversation, which renders it unnecessary for me to enter into fuller explanations."

"I must apologise for correcting you, Lady Callender," said Mr. Merton, "but Miss Malcolmson has not made me acquainted with your conversation. She was as reticent as you are, and left it to me to distinguish her meaning."

"Really, Miss Malcolmson," said she, turning upon me, "I had no idea you would take what I said to heart, or act upon it. I tried my best to represent myself to you as a friend who had only your interests in view."

"You advised me to leave Ashleigh Manor," I answered.

"Did I? I do not remember."

"I think I can recall your very words: you said that a young girl is bound to protect herself against the aspersions which menace her character by withdrawing herself from the position that provokes them."

"Well, you have a better memory than I have. But don't you think my reasoning sound, Mr. Merton?"

"Yes, in a general sense. But by applying

it to a particular case you presuppose a grievance. I should like to know whether it be true that the people here have taken the liberty to discuss Miss Malcolmson."

"I did not say they had; I suggested they might."

"Oh, mamma, why *did* you interfere?" cried Miss Callender.

"Could I have foreseen this, Constance, I should certainly not have done so," she answered, with the air of a deeply-injured woman. "My good nature betrayed me. I am very sorry. I meant what I said in kindness. Miss Malcolmson must know I did."

"I don't think I can give you a better proof how I esteem your advice than by acting upon it," I said.

"I am sure I shall be very sorry if you leave Ashleigh Manor through anything I may have told you," she exclaimed. "Mr. Merton prizes your services so much that I should never forgive myself if I proved the cause of his losing them."

"Oh, mamma, why *did* you interfere?" muttered Miss Callender again.

"I beg that you will not consider *my* feelings, Lady Callender," remarked Mr. Merton, blandly. "I think that all the sympathy we

are capable of feeling should be given to Miss Malcolmson."

"I deeply deplore that mamma should ever have taken the liberty to speak to Miss Malcolmson," exclaimed Miss Callender, taking the stranger's part against the parent, as is sometimes the custom with children.

"Oh, Conny, your reproaches make me feel that I have acted in a very unfriendly way," cried her ladyship whimperingly. "I am afraid, Mr. Merton, that you will think me impertinently intrusive. Cannot I entreat you, Miss Malcolmson, to reconsider your decision? I did not say—I don't in the least remember having said—that your name was *positively* discussed by the people. I hinted, as delicately as I could, that they *might* talk of you."

"She is right to have acted upon the hint, for you painted a formidable contingency," said Mr. Merton.

"But what need Miss Malcolmson care *what* the neighbours say?" asked Miss Callender.

Mr. Merton waited to see if I would answer. I only bit my lip, and glanced towards the door. My position was indeed growing every moment more painful and embarrassing; and, what was worse, I felt that I

was losing the self-control that had hitherto sustained me.

"I have no doubt, Lady Callender," said Mr. Merton, caustically, "that in putting this young lady on her guard, you meant to act only the part of a kind and disinterested friend. You may, however, conceive, from the opinion I have expressed of Miss Malcolmson, that I cannot consider myself under any obligation to you for severing me from one whose society I value, whose sympathy I desire, whose devotion to my interests I know to be sincere. My own feelings, however, form but a minor consideration. What she suffers, you and Miss Callender may, as women, guess. It is bitter to me to reflect that this young lady, who has served me with so much zeal, should be made to suffer through me. Yet, when you tell her that her name is being discussed——"

"I said it might be," eagerly from Lady Callender.

"The contingency cannot make her present feelings more enviable; nor does it exonerate me from the charge of being an accomplice—though surely a most guiltless accomplice!—in the conspiracy of the gossips against her peace of mind."

Lady Callender stared at this reasoning. Conny's eyes were still too innocent to express her thoughts.

"Miss Malcolmson," he continued, "deserves all the reparation we can make her."

"I beg of her not to heed what I said, but to remain at Ashleigh Manor," interrupted her ladyship.

"But don't you see, Lady Callender, that by continuing to live here she will provoke the gossip you have cautioned her against?"

"Yes, I see that," she replied, "but I am sure she will suffer your anxiety for her to remain to outweigh her scruples, which, after all, *may* prove imaginary."

It was plain that her ladyship was very anxious not to offend Mr. Merton.

"That is cruel counsel," I exclaimed, flushing up with indignation. "Remember what you said to me. Did you not tell me that you were sure I had no friends, otherwise I should have been taken away from this house? Did you not say that people would never be brought to believe that a governess would condescend to take the place of an upper-servant? for that was what you called the position of housekeeper. You told me that the opinion of the world was everything to

our sex, and urged me not to provoke its bad opinion; and now you advise me to remain?"

She had no refuge now but that last asylum of feeble minds—contempt.

"Really," cried she, scornfully, "I think you forget yourself in addressing me in that tone."

"Oh, we must not quarrel, we must remain good friends," said Mr. Merton, with the smile on his lips I had noticed on entering the room. "Come, Miss Malcolmson's sensitiveness has been deeply wounded. By coupling her name with mine, or by threatening to couple it, people—a vague term!—make me the culpable cause of her sufferings. I am sure it would be yours and Miss Callender's wish I should make her the only reparation that under the circumstances is possible. With her consent, then, she shall *not* leave Ashleigh Manor—her name *shall* be coupled with mine, but in a sense that shall effectually put an end to people's sneers. Miss Malcolmson, before these ladies, I ask you to be my wife."

He came to my side and took my hand. I looked up at him, doubting whether I had heard aright. The wild sense of unreality which equally accompanies the shock of terror

and the shock of joy, was upon me. I doubt even if the deep meaning that made his eyes luminous and tender, would have recalled me to the reality of the scene in which I was acting so notable a part. What made me promptly sensible that I was not dreaming was Lady Callender.

Come quickly, some skilful delineator of matronly countenances, and sketch me her ladyship's face. Come, and with cunning pencil and the archest humour, portray me, if you can, the amazement, the horror, the open-eyed whiteness which made her face an object never to be forgotten.

She sat rigid in her chair, as if she were in a fit. Miss Callender had risen, and had come to her mamma's side. *Her* face was calm—surprised, indeed—but calm when compared with her mother's, with even a sub-expression of merriment in it as if she found matter for mirth in this unexpected conclusion.

I felt Mr. Merton's strong hand pressing mine, and the contact seemed to pour a new tide of life along my veins. I stood up and looked at him. For the moment the two spectators who were staring at us, vanished. I saw nothing—I saw nobody but *him.*

There was passion and seriousness in every line of his pale face.

"I ask you in the presence of these ladies to be my wife. Will you?"

There was love in his eyes, and love in his voice. I answered firmly:

"I will."

He turned to Lady Callender.

"I think *my wife* need stand in no fear of gossip if she remains at Ashleigh Manor now?"

Lady Callender rose from her chair with some difficulty.

"We have intruded too long as it is," she panted, as though she had been rehearsing a speech, and began in the middle. "I can only congratulate Miss Malcolmson on her good fortune, and leave the lovers alone," added she, with a look at her daughter.

"I wish you both happiness, I am sure," said Miss Callender, who had grown very pale.

"Thank you for your kind wishes. And you can oblige an old friend, Lady Callender," remarked Mr. Merton, faintly smiling, "by contradicting any rumours which may be already current respecting myself and my *betrothed.* Of course you will meet with

some one malicious enough to drop 'hints,' but you may easily set the gossip right by detailing this scene in all its particulars—for which I am sure I may trust your memory."

He opened the door; the ladies bowed to me and passed out. Whilst I waited for him to return, I wondered if I were dreaming. But there was too much sharp reality in Lady Callender's disappointment and mortification to allow me to believe myself deluded by my imagination. In a very few moments Mr. Merton came back. He held out his hands.

"Kate, come to me now."

I went up to him shyly, and put my hands in his.

"Do you love me, Kate?"

"I do."

He took me in his arms, and held me to his heart.

"Your love is not the growth of this minute, is it, Kate?" he whispered.

"Do you not know? Have you not guessed?" I replied, looking up at him.

"I guessed, but I was not sure. I could not believe that you had found anything in me to love. Have you not loved me for a long time? Tell me you have—it will make me happy to hear."

"I have loved you for a long time, but I have tried hard to keep my secret. I thought you would despise me for daring to love you. And now your love makes me too happy."

And I wept upon his breast; but mine were tears of joy.

He led me to a chair, and seated himself at my feet. How accurately does memory reproduce that scene—the clear, glowing fire in the grate filling the room, which was darkening under the shadow of the early autumnal night, with a soft and delicate radiance, in which I could see his fine eyes, at once glittering and tender, upraised to mine. He seemed happy; he whispered the softest words of love to me; he ceaselessly caressed my hand. And yet, thinking of him in my calmer moods, that air of happiness did not recur to me as something real. Then my very being was merged into his, and I lost sight of his individuality, or surely I must have found his happiness, which he strove to express by smiles and words, to lay but thinly on his melancholy, in the same way, to employ a material image, that a sunbeam would illuminate without inspiriting the melancholy of a sad-visaged portrait.

"And now," he said, kissing my hand, "Kate will not leave me."

"No, she will remain with you always now."

"Always for me to find by my side, ever constant, ever loving, in shadow or shine?"

"Yes, and ever reverencing the qualities which have formed for me an ideal of manhood, and made me love you."

"God grant it," he exclaimed.

He bent his head, and a silence fell between us. Presently he looked up, smiling.

"I am afraid we have made two mortal enemies to-day."

"One was my enemy before I was hers."

"Only one?"

"No—I should say both," I answered, laughing. "I was thinking of Lady Callender; but there have been times when I have hated her daughter."

"You were jealous of her?"

"Yes. Why did you act so as to make me think you loved her?"

"Did I? Well, I am afraid I have acted mischievously towards that devoted couple. How could I help it? Birds of prey will make sportsmen of the most peaceful men. This elderly kite wanted to swoop upon me,

and carry me off to feed her young withal. I am afraid the young would have found me tough eating. Yet had you heard the old lady talk, you would have imagined me the most lovely creature that ever matrimony victimised. Oh, I can't help owing people a grudge who try to do me an ill. Her ladyship would have injured me if she could, by marrying me to her daughter, who, though she masked her greediness with much skill, only wanted my money."

"I knew that all along."

"And so did I. What! is an old man like me to be fooled by such trickling nonsense as that worldly matron poured into my ears? Miss Callender once told me that she knew my character better than I did myself. Such conceit merits the issue that befell it this afternoon."

"I used to think she knew your character pretty well. I would see her making you laugh and amusing you, when nothing I could have said would have stirred your gravity."

"I tell you, Kate, I saw through Miss Conny's game as soon as she began to play it, and through her mother's, too. Their boldness, their cheating, their looking into each other's hand, and whispering each other's play,

amused me. I took dummy—*you*—against them, and have beaten."

"I am afraid you cheated, too."

"How?"

"You led Miss Callender to believe that you were attached to her."

"I am not aware of having done so. But the girl has conceit enough to generate greater glories than my love. The *coup* was a bold one to bring them here and dish them, as schoolboys say, before you. But I was determined to pay her ladyship out. Oh, we have made two deadly enemies."

"You deserve their hate. Your stratagem was a cruel one. Think of Lady Callender's humiliation! Picture her feelings when she recalls how you set me over her daughter!"

"Come, you are too much a woman to take another woman's disappointment very greatly to heart. Own to me that you think, on the whole, that Lady Callender has been paid in her own coin?"

"Well, sir——"

"Sir! why do you dub me knight? I am a gentleman."

I laughed and continued:

"I was going to say that it is not Lady Callender I feel for, but her daughter."

"You feel for Miss Callender, do you? Upon my honour, Kate, you have the most extensive range of sympathies that ever woman had. Do you think, had Miss Callender guessed that you loved me, that it would have caused her a moment's regret to know that her mother had driven you out of the house by her *lies?*"

"No; but all the same I can sympathise with her mortification. She was certain, in her own mind, of marrying you. I dare say it was quite likely that Lady Callender herself gave out the rumour of your engagement to her daughter."

"Very likely. But don't let us trouble more about them, Kate. Talk to me of yourself. Tell me of your love."

"Are you happy?"

"Yes, as happy," looking up at me, "as it is possible for a man to be in this world. It is not reasonable to expect perfect happiness, is it? There *must* be an alloy, to give happiness wearing power, I suppose, as gold is made durable by mixing baser metal with it."

"But now—now that we have no secrets from each other," I said fondly, "you will not tell me, as you once did, that you have not been melancholy?"

"Inquisitive child! how do you know that you were not the cause of my melancholy?"

"No—it was not I. Give me the true reason. I mean to make your happiness. You shall never be melancholy again."

"You shall make my happiness, Kate..... See how dark it is. Shall we have the lamp? No, it is pleasanter sitting thus in the twilight. But I want to see your face when you talk to me."

He rose, stirred the fire, which burst into flames and lit up the room brightly. He pushed a low chair near mine, and seating himself passed his arm round my waist and looked into my eyes.

"Now I can see you. The eyes are true orators. I like to look at your face when I talk to you, for then I shall be able to tell whether you are sincere or not."

"Do you think me capable of insincerity?"

"No," he exclaimed hurriedly. "No—I believe that you love me. I recall the past. I remember actions and words which, now that you have confessed your love, tell me you are truthful. Kate, whisper to me what there was in my melancholy—or that air, that habitual air of mine, which you mistook for melancholy—that made you so curious to divine the cause?"

"It was my love, not my curiosity, that made me so anxious about you. There have been times when you were terribly depressed. Your face grew thin and pale. You seemed to be ill and in pain. I could not see you suffer and not sympathise with you and make one brave effort to give you relief. And brave it was, for you were very formidable that day, very angry with me. I should not have been daunted had I been what I am now—your promised wife. But *then* I felt my sympathy an impertinence."

He searched my face keenly whilst I spoke. I ceased; but still he held his penetrating eyes fixed on my face. Was it the shadows dancing to the fireplay that made his expression puzzling with a look of distrust?

"You have faithful, honest eyes," he exclaimed in a low voice. "But your very faithfulness may make you loyal to thoughts which are unfaithful, not to yours, but to *my* love. Kate, have you any secrets which you would not wish me to know?"

"None."

He was silent. Suddenly he asked:

"Why do you not ask me if I hide any secrets from you?"

"I need not ask. I know that you do."

He started and drew his arm from my waist.

"What would those secrets be?"

"One would be the secret of your melancholy," I answered, smiling.

He seized my hand and held it tightly.

"Now," he said, "tell me that you have guessed it."

"I have not guessed it. If I had I should reason with you. I should tell you that you are cruel to allow any real or fancied sorrow to weigh upon your heart and break down your spirits. You see, in spite of what you say, I still insist on believing that you *are* melancholy."

"Real or fancied sorrow—which should weigh down the heart most?"

"I should choose the actual before the imaginary. The one is material: you may master its significance—know the worst of it. But the other is shadowy, fed by fancy, it grows and darkens with time: it is impalpable and illusive; it is indeed a kind of madness."

"And do you think the cause of my melancholy real or fancied?"

"Fancied. Is it not?"

He smiled, but made no answer.

"I will have no secrets from you now," I

continued; "and will tell you what I have sometimes thought—for I have thought much on your melancholy."

"Yes—I was sure you had."

"I have sometimes thought you the victim of a delusion which in some way, unguessed by me, owes its origin to the murder of Mrs. Merton. I have further thought that there is some unaccountable identity between this delusion and the Angels' Court."

For one second I felt his hand tremble; the next moment he had withdrawn it.

"I have asked myself," I continued, "why you have locked up the old part of the house."

"Did I not explain the reason?" he interrupted quickly.

"Yes," I answered, thinking of the denial that had been given me to his statements by the housemaid; "but that reason did not satisfy me. I noticed your unwillingness to allow anybody to enter the building; and I remembered how angry you were with me for lingering a moment or two in the gallery of the Angels' Court."

"And putting these things together you came to the conclusion that I was a monomaniac?"

"Well, that you were vexed by some delu-

sion. You will never know what a living mystery I have often thought you. Some of your actions have appeared to me so unnecessary, or to use a better word, so inconsequential, that I could not conceive their purpose. I could not understand your object in withdrawing yourself from society; why you shut up the old house; why you had and have such a particular horror of the Angels' Court; why you were so angry with me for sympathising with you. And that is not all. Your latest actions are riddles. Why did you lead poor Miss Callender to imagine you were fond of her? and why," I added in a whisper, stooping my lip to his ear, "did you not tell me you loved me before to-day, but delay your confession until you had asked me to be your wife?"

"Kate," he said with a short laugh, "did I not once tell you that you were born to be a lawyer? Nature made a mistake when she put a forensic genius into a female form. But you are not my wife yet, miss! the parson has not yet given the title-deeds of my heart into your keeping. That property is still mine. When lawfully made yours then I give you permission to explore its chambers."

"I will wait. But depend upon it, when I

do effect an entrance, my first act will be to put the demon Melancholy to flight. I will allow nothing to share that abode with me. I shall be jealous of sorrow—real or imaginary—if I find it there; will kill it if I can, and my love shall read its burial service."

"Ay, and let the devil go into crape. It is fit that Melancholy should have the devil for a mourner. What! is it ten minutes to six? How the time passes!"

CHAPTER V.

PENDING OUR UNION.

WHEN the night came I thought over what had happened dispassionately. Darkness and silence are friendly to reason. With the brilliant lamp-light on my eyes and with my hand in Mr. Merton's, and his voice in my ear, I could not think; I could only be happy.

Joyous as I was and triumphant, I was puzzled. I was set wondering and doubting when I reflected upon the offer he had made me. He wanted me to be his wife—did he love me? He had told me he did, and I ought to have believed him—but since when had he loved me? Never by word or look up to that day had he given me the slightest reason to suppose that he regarded me in any other light than that of a friend. Had he guessed that I loved him? He had told me he

had not. Why did he suppose that I should accept him? Had I rejected him before the Callenders how great would have been his humiliation—their triumph! Yet he could have felt no fear of such an issue or he would never have acted the part. What a conundrum he was! the more I pondered the less I comprehended him. Every action was a riddle: his every-day life a mystery. What had brought that distrustful expression into his face when he asked me if I knew the cause of his melancholy? Would to God, I remember thinking, I did know that cause! know whether it were real or fancied! My knowledge might serve to make him happy; and in the cause I should certainly discover the key to the enigma of his nature.

When I awoke next morning and recalled what had happened, it again seemed to me that I was in dream. "This looks like real daylight," I thought, staring around me; "but fancy plays a cunning part in sleep. Something will happen presently to awaken me." The notion, however, that I was in a dream did not last long; for I found myself taking unusual pains with my toilette.

Vanity apart, I may say that I looked pretty enough. I had greatly improved in

appearance since I had been at Ashleigh Manor. My long term of comparative solitude had imparted a somewhat pensive expression to my face, but it in no wise approached melancholy, for my eyes were bright and cheerful, and rescued my face from gravity even when I was in a despondent mood. That morning my eyes were wonderfully gay, and I caught myself frequently smiling at the glass; in short I was in a thorough good humour with myself. After all it implied the possession of some kind of charms, whether mental or physical, to attract the love of such a man as Mr. Merton. Miss Callender had tried hard for him and lost. I might be sure that there were dozens of girls among his friends who would consider themselves immensely complimented by an offer of marriage from the master of Ashleigh Manor. Why should not I indulge myself in all the vanity I chose to feel? I had won him honestly enough. I had been guilty of no tricks to make him love me.

He was standing at the dining-room window when I entered. When the door opened, he turned, saw me, and came forward. If I had hoped to find his face less pale than heretofore, and with its familiar melancholy passed

out of it, I should have been disappointed. But he smiled winningly as he kissed me.

"That is my privilege now, is it not, Kate?"

"Yes," I answered, with a good deal of colour in my cheek; "but in return you ought to concede me a privilege."

"What?"

"The privilege of making you happy. See," I said, touching his cheek, "my love has done nothing for your paleness. I shall regard my love as a deceit and a snare unless it makes you happy."

"It does make me happy."

"No. Happiness has gayer eyes than yours; and the painters always give it a colour."

"Oh, that is the conventional notion of happiness. Mayn't a pale-faced person be happy? Is it necessary that joy should puff us out with health, like Gilray's portrait of John Bull? When I was in Italy I once saw a very happy face under a priest's hood. The face was cadaverous and yellow, but laughing eyes and red cheeks would not have given me so complete an idea of happiness as that lank countenance conveyed. There was peace and satisfaction on it; and God help us if these

spirits were not permitted to take up their abode in any creature less rosy than a butcher-boy!"

"Well, though you may be happy, I shall try and make you look so."

"Do. And now let us talk of our marriage. When will you marry me? Why do you hide your face? Are you afraid of marriage? You may well be—for you have seen enough since you have been at Ashleigh Manor to understand its obligations—and I have not spared the subject, have I? But do not fear. I love you, Kate—I will make you happy if I can."

"I do not fear," I answered, taking his hand and meeting his eyes; "I will marry you when you like."

"That is a brave answer. It shows you have confidence in me, which every woman should have in the man she means to marry; or it were better that her death-knell should peal for her than her marriage-bells. This is October. Shall we fix it for the second week in November?"

"Yes, sir."

"What a second nature is habit! I think you will go on calling me 'sir' to the end of your days. Stay! I have fixed a time for our

marriage, forgetting that a night has passed since I asked you to marry me. In the night Reflection comes; and Reflection's handmaid is nearly always Regret. Do you repent having accepted me?"

"How can you ask?"

"Remember, I am not a young man. You will have to run the long race of twenty years yet before you come to the point I have reached. The world is before you; your aunt's legacy makes you independent; if you marry me you cut yourself off from the chance of marrying some handsome, high-spirited, ingenious young man whom you will adore for his beauty and reverence for his talent. Reflect, Kate!"

"You tease me. I will marry you."

"Put your hands on my shoulders and let me look into your eyes."

So keen was his gaze that it seemed to penetrate to my very heart. I looked at him fearlessly, for I knew there was nothing for him to see but love.

"What do you seek?" I asked.

"*Yourself.* That inner life of yours which is the woman—*you.* Is the evidence of the eyes trustworthy? I have known them to take false oaths."

"What do mine affirm?"

"Love."

"Believe them, then."

"So I will. But they affirm *only* love—I seek for more."

"What more would you have?"

He gazed at me intently without reply, and then suddenly withdrawing himself from my hands, walked to the window. He came back.

"We will be married in the second week of November—let us say the twelfth. Will that give you time to prepare?"

"It is your wish, and I must make it give me time."

"I will help you. Ashleigh will supply your immediate wants unless you are grown luxurious. We will do our shopping together—unless like some ladies I know, you dislike to have a man with you when you shop."

"I shall want you to be with me; but I promise you that my requirements will be small."

"Ah, all of you say that. But the shopmen generally contrive to defeat your honest intentions. However, we will be seen together that the world may know we are to be

married. But, Kate, our marriage must be a quiet one."

"The quieter the better."

"You are a loving child to fall so readily into my view. We will have no friends—and the witnesses must be extemporised. We will choose an early hour, and keep the day secret, or all Ashleigh will turn out, though it take place in the dead of night. Shall we settle it thus?"

"Yes."

He kissed me; the moment after a footman entered, and we talked of the weather.

I have no idea how or from whom the servants received the intelligence of their master's engagement to me; I never asked Mr. Merton if he had told them, though I have no doubt he did. I only know that on that very afternoon I was made to feel that the servants had guessed, or been told the truth by the significant respect with which they received my orders. How proud, how elated I was! What joy did the reflection give me that the man from whom but a day or two before I had thought to be severed for ever, was now my own, for me to love and cherish and be with until death should part us! I walked with a more elastic tread, with a more up-

right mien. I could not help my newly-acquired dignities being full-blown. I felt that I was as good as the mistress of Ashleigh Manor now, and I traversed the spacious chambers with a conscious sense of possession and privilege.

Mr. Merton noticed the change in me, and it seemed to gratify and amuse him.

"All these fine toys are yours now," he remarked, having caught my eye wandering about the room.

"I must have your portrait taken," he once said to me, on meeting me in the gallery, "and placed among this group. You will have to look as haughty and forbidding as you can, or your face will be out of keeping with those repellant ladies—notably with that old dame in the big ruff, like the Baptist's head on a charger."

"You should sit first," I answered. "I do not see your portrait anywhere."

"Oh, my beautiful face was once taken, and very cleverly, too. Its one fault was, the likeness was too life-like. At least, Mrs. Merton thought so, for in a fit of passion she—but *nil nisi bonum.* Never mind what she did. At all events, the canvas had to come out. I utilized the frame for that picture of Cupid

looking at himself in the river, in the hall. The substitution was an unintentional piece of irony. When my friends used to ask me where my portrait was, I pointed to the Cupid. They never saw the real joke, and so much the better."

I forget whether it was on this occasion that he said to me :

"I ought to have told you, little one"—that was the title he sometimes called me by—"that our honeymoon must shine in English skies—over this house. I don't mean to follow custom and travel."

"Speaking for myself, I should prefer remaining at home; but, speaking for you, I wish you would travel. You want a change."

"Oh, Kate, how you rattle your change in my ear! I will tell you an anecdote of old Dr. Johnson. A gentleman showed him a cold bath, and expatiated on its salubrity. 'Sir,' said the doctor, 'how do you do?' 'Very well, thank you, doctor,' answered the gentleman. 'Then, sir,' cried the doctor, 'leave well alone and be content. I hate immersion.' I am well, I don't want a change; I mean to leave well alone and be content. I hate travelling. What cant is there on the subject of what the world has

nicknamed honeymoon! Why must a man make a journey when he marries? I once crossed the Channel in the Dover packet with two miserable-looking people, whom somebody told me were a newly-married pair. They were going for their honeymoon. Poor wretches! they would have found a sweeter moon at home had they stopped there. They were deplorably sick, Kate. They were speechless. They lolled against each other with outstretched hands like dolls. The bridegroom's eyes stared at us, blood-shot, through his hair; the bride's mouth was crammed with cambric. For five hours we were tossing about in mid-Channel. Where was the gentleman's sentiment? Now up in his head, now down in his feet. Where was the lady's romance? And would you have me bear you company in this sort of thing? Don't fancy our troubles would end at the first port we touched at across the water. You have yet to learn the horrors of foreign travel; the rascally postillions in the hire of the brigands; the landlords of the hotels who are banditti in mufti; the dirt, the language, the onions, the impudence, the delays and losses of time and luggage and temper. Depend upon it, if there were fewer honeymoons

there would be more marriages. For these are the moons which drive young men mad."

"You paint a dreadful picture; I certainly think we had better stop at home."

"Ah!" he cried, with a look of pleasure and relief upon his face. "I will make Katie a wise and shrewd girl yet. You shall see life as life is, not through the spectacles of society and with Cant for a showman. And yet the world calls my views cynical, because I *will* see nothing but the truth."

"But it is better not to see the truth sometimes."

He looked at me earnestly, smiled, and said:

"The most ill-visaged truth is better than the prettiest lie any day. I know there are people who like to be imposed on—though I hope I'm not a knave for having a knave's knowledge. I hate shams, spangles, vermilion, and false smiles and false teeth. Lady Callender is a sham, and so is her daughter. Had I called them liars to their faces, I should but have spoken the truth—yet how insulted they would have been! But what word fits their flattery and simpers and grins and sympathy? There are hundreds of

people, who think themselves mighty honest people, who would sincerely blush to tell a verbal lie, but whose whole lives are lies. What are people who try to get their daughters married? who give dinners, with bailiffs in the back kitchen? who begrime their bottles of wormwood and water with chalk and cobwebs, and pretend to have them fetched from their bins? who wear fine coats and coarse linen? who jingle halfpence in their pockets and talk of their investments? who go in debt to their dressmakers and tailors, and forget to pay? I detest these impostors—these scarecrows in the fields of life—giving themselves the airs of men and women. When I meet one, I feel a lively joy in jerking the mask off his face with an humble bow of contempt. But your true-hearted man, whose shirt shows more whitely through his tattered coat than some fine men's skins would—who feels poverty no disgrace, though he makes no brag of it as an honour, for that's a sham, too—who eats his bread and cheese without a murmur, and who will give you a slice off it without apologising for the poorness of his fare—before such a man I will stand hat in hand, and reverence in his life my ideal of true nobility."

Of this kind were the sentiments which had brought me to his feet.

"If he would only shake off his melancholy," I would think; "if he would only allow his heart to be inspirited, that its cheerful sunshine might disperse the air of mystery which darkens and envelops him, how great, how good, how noble he would be!"

He accompanied me on my shopping excursions, as he had proposed. We drove together, and I saw the people look at us and speak to each other as we passed. Once we met the Callenders. The carriage had just halted when they came round the corner of the street. I wondered whether they would stop and speak. I think Miss Callender would have done so, but her ladyship, with a rather pink face, passed us hurriedly, saluting us with a stiff bow. Her daughter followed, honouring us with a more cordial recognition.

"That girl will make her fortune yet," said Mr. Merton, dryly. "She is a hundred-fold more clever than her mother. The cleverest woman I ever met in my life was a certain lady who never would show that she was affronted. Nothing could have made her exhibit resentment. Indeed, she had a far

sweeter smile for her enemies than her friends. I predicted well of that lady, and have lived to see her the wife of a duke. One great way of getting on in the world is to make a point of bearing no ill will—in your face. Somebody has taught Miss Callender this secret; and, mark me, she will smile herself into a first-rate marriage."

I don't know if his prophecy proved right, for not long after Lady Callender and her daughter returned to London, and I never heard of them again; but, whatever her future was, I hope it realised her most sanguine expectations, for she certainly would deserve everything she could get.

CHAPTER VI.

MY BRIDAL EVE.

I FOUND Mr. Merton a truly liberal lover. If, as some cynic declares, a lover's sincerity is to be proportioned only by the amount of money he spends on the object of his affections, I may fairly consider Mr. Merton to have been desperately fond of me. Ashleigh, though a small town, had a few good shops in it. Of course they could not give me the choice I might have had in London, but they supplied me, to use the shopman's language, with "London goods." Mr. Merton was liberal to rashness. He purchased many more things than I wanted. He bought things that were of no use to me.

"Don't, pray don't buy that dress," I would exclaim. "It will not become me."

"Nonsense," he would answer, "any dress

will become you." And then to the shopman: "Yes, we will take that."

His frequent remark after every excursion was,

"This rubbish will do for you to go on with. By-and-by we will go to London and rig ourselves out *à la mode.* Tarpaulins pass at the sea-side for fashion, so we needn't be particular just now."

The days flitted by rapidly. I had plenty to do—plenty to occupy my mind as well as my fingers. Hardly three weeks had been allowed me in which to make my preparations, yet I found that time ample. After all, I had not much to prepare. We were not going to leave Ashleigh Manor; and I could easily complete my trousseau after I was married. Though I knew that there would be no spectators of our marriage, I still wished to look my best. Mr. Merton made all the congregation I cared for. I had but one wish, and that was to please him. Severe and neutral colours were what he liked. I think his wife had taught him to hate striking and gaudy tints. She was associated in his mind with pink and crimson and green, and ample skirts and low-cut bodies, hoops, and elaborate fans, and feathers of a brilliant hue, which

were then worn in the hair, sometimes with turbans. Had his life with her been pleasant I dare say he might have found something to admire in her taste; but the reverse was the fact, and I could see how completely his suggestions to me, whilst we did our shopping, were dictated by an aversion to the colours and stuffs his wife had worn and liked.

On the morning before the day fixed for our marriage, as I left the dining-room, in order to summon Mr. Merton to breakfast, expecting to find him in the library, I saw him step out hurriedly through the door of the ante-room at the extremity of the hall. He did not see me for the moment, as I had halted under the shadow of the gallery staircase. When he was abreast of me, I exclaimed,

"I was going to look for you in the library. Had I known you were in the old house, I should have followed you there; and who knows but that I might have helped you to put to flight that horrid ghost which I am quite sure exercises a wicked influence over you."

At the first sound of my voice he had started, then turned and watched me whilst I spoke.

"I went no further than the ante-room," he answered. "I have a mind to bring some of

the pictures out of those damp rooms. There is a good portrait of Erasmus, which would hang with advantage in the library; and there is a picture after Leonardo, for which I know my father gave two hundred guineas, that must not be allowed to remain where it is. But what made you come after me?"

"I only wished to tell you that breakfast was ready."

"Oh, you should let the footman do these errands."

"But it pleases me to wait upon you," I answered, slipping my hand in his as he walked to the dining-room. "If I didn't love you I shouldn't follow you."

He did not press my hand, but entered the room gloomily, without speaking. Presently I saw him make an effort to rally.

"This time to-morrow, Kate," he said, with a smile, glancing at the clock, "you will have lost your name for ever and taken mine. Mrs. Merton! do you like the sound?"

"Yes, because it makes me your wife."

"Should I like it? There is not very much to endear it to me."

"Not when it is the name of the girl you love?"

"Her name is Kate," he said, tenderly.

"So was the other's, indeed; but I never called her by it. She made me give her her full title, Katherina. That degenerated in time into 'my dear,' which also sank and expired. So Kate is a new name for my heart. I shall never think of you as Mrs. Merton."

"Call me your wife—I want no other name."

"It is not a very gracious thing for a man to speak of his first wife to the girl he is going to marry, is it? But after all it can only be ungracious in a man who speaks of his first wife fondly."

"I should be sorry to marry a man who spoke of his first wife fondly to me. I should think him disloyal, and that he could not make me happy. If a man is fond enough of his dead wife to speak lovingly of her, he ought to remain true to her. There would be irony in such a man's endearments."

"You don't fear any irony from me?"

"No, for I know that you did not love Mrs. Merton."

"I hated her!" he exclaimed, his eyes flashing. "I hated her whilst she lived, and I hate her doubly now that she is dead; for when she died she did not take the misery she had cursed me with away with her to the

grave, but left it behind—envenomed, double-dyed! Would to God!" he cried, passionately, "that the hand which killed her had killed me, too!"

A servant entered the room at the moment. In the silence that was forced upon us by the man's presence, Mr. Merton regained his composure. I was dismayed by his vehemence, and watched him with startled eyes. He tried to court a happier expression into my face by smiles and caressing glances, and in a measure succeeded; but still I found myself puzzled and frightened. When we were alone, I said:

"Why do you marry me? Is it not because you believe in my sincerity and love, my anxiety to share your sorrows and increase your happiness? That is a wife's mission, and with God's help I will discharge it. But how can I do so if you hide your heart away from me, and alarm and puzzle me by your language?"

"Have I terrified my little one?" he asked softly. "It is not my wish to do so. I want her to love me and serve me as she wishes."

"Why will you not let me do so?"

"Have I prohibited you? Have I not asked you to make my happiness?"

"But you are tormented with a trouble you will not disclose to me. It makes you wretched, and very often cross with me. Make *my* happiness by telling me what your sorrow is, that I may extinguish it if I can, or that I may share it."

"Have you not guessed it?" he asked, looking at me curiously.

"No," I replied earnestly; "I would tell you if I had."

An incredulous smile twisted his lips for a moment into a sneer. It vanished; he came over to me and kissed me.

"Don't let us fret each other with this kind of talk, Kate."

"But it makes me fret to see you unhappy. You *are* unhappy. When I saw you come out of the ante-room just now there was more grief and melancholy in your face than I have seen for a long time past. See what a poor compliment your melancholy is to me."

"I shall be happier this time to-morrow."

"You tell me this, but you don't mean what you say. What *is* there in the old house that makes you so gloomy?"

"Nothing," he answered, drawing himself up, with his brow slightly contracting.

"Why do you go there?"

"To see after my pictures and the furniture."

"No, it is not that: tell me the delusion."

"What do you mean by delusion? Have you not accompanied me through the house? You know every room in it. Once indeed you imagined that you saw and heard a ghost; but that is nonsense. What in the name of heaven, then, do you think the house can contain to make me gloomy or miserable?"

"It is because I have seen with my own eyes that the house is empty that I am sure you are made miserable by some delusion respecting it."

"What an opinion you must have of my intellect! Do you think that I believe in ghosts?"

"I will believe in anything until you tell me the truth."

"If you like you may come with me now and search every chamber in the old house and find, if you can, the goblin which attracts me thither, as you fancy, with its magnetic influence."

"No; I do not wish to go."

"Pshaw!" he exclaimed impatiently, "we

are talking like children. Ghosts and delusions and chimeras dire! Come, the subject teases me."

That evening I sat alone with him until a late hour. The night was a stormy one. The wind swept round the house, with voices like a pack of hounds in full cry. It bellowed in the chimney and lashed the panes with frequent discharges of hail. Outside all was midnight blackness; within was warmth and light, and in my heart, at least, love.

When the tea-tray had been removed, Mr. Merton made me sit by him, and thus, with my hand in his, detained me. His mood was capricious. Now he would whisper to me all manner of loving speeches; anon he would sink into silence, fix his eyes on the fire, while his brow would darken with a sullen shadow, and his manner betray a total unconsciousness of my presence, albeit our fingers were linked. Then he would start up, provoke me with some little caustic speech, quite venomous with cynicism—a sally he would follow up by others in quick succession, until his humour had played itself out.

I studied him narrowly in the pauses of our

conversation, and noticed that our three weeks' love-making had worked no improvement in his face. He was as pale and thin as ever he was, with the abiding sub-expression of melancholy which his smiles only served to disclose more markedly.

My vanity was wounded; my love piqued. Here on the very eve of his marriage with the girl for whom he professed, at least, a warm attachment, was he looking a great deal more melancholy than he was wont to look in the life-time of his wife; when indeed he had a good excuse to seem sorrowful. I was jealous of his grief. It appeared as if he could never love me engrossedly—as I wanted him to love me—if the cause of his melancholy were not removed. What was that cause? Had it reference, as I had long deemed, to the Angels' Court? He had challenged me to accompany him over the old house and explore the rooms; but I had refused because I knew I should see nothing. See? What could there be to see? Imagination had long ago failed to conceive anything powerful enough to attract him so frequently to the ancient building unless he were under the spell of some extraordinary delusion.

Watching him, however, jealous of his

melancholy, it flashed upon me what a glorious lover-like triumph it would be for me to master, on the very eve of my nuptials, the secret—the cause—of his sorrow! If it were a material cause then must it have existence in some one chamber which I had missed, or which lay, perhaps, in a portion of the house I had not penetrated. If immaterial—if the cause were in his own fancy—then must I wait until, by every tender art I could practise, I should succeed in winning it from him. What should prohibit me making a search that very night? My timidity caused me, indeed, to recoil at first from the mere idea of so lonesome and dree a task; but I gained courage by reflecting that my researches must be crowned with some kind of reward; for if I found nothing, then might I be sure that he was fascinated by a delusion of a nature I must leave it to my love to discover; whilst, on the other hand, if I should detect signs of a material reason for his melancholy—but what? What was there, under heaven, that those rooms could hold to make him miserable?

These reflections sent me into a deep reverie; turning my face, suddenly, I saw that he was watching me.

"What were you thinking of, Kate?"

"Of you. There is nothing else I can think of now."

"And you never think of anything else? Yet you look somewhat gloomy. Is the ceremony of to-morrow to be one of those tragical events which cast their shadows before them? Happiness is a transparent spirit that throws no shadow, unless lustre be shadow. If that foreboding look lingers on your face, I shall think you are wanting to cry off!"

"What a misfortune it is to have a sceptical mind! Why do you distrust my love? Why do you imagine, because I am thoughtful for a few moments, that I regret that I am to marry you?"

"Come, don't reproach me so sadly and seriously. I have been watching you for these three minutes past, and speculating on your thoughts and wondering whether the somewhat gloomy look on your face had reference to your marriage. What would I give to know your heart! How should I like to hear exactly the opinion you have of me!"

"And what would I give to know *your* heart! I think mine is to be easily read—more easily now than before—for hitherto

my love has been like a dark lantern; but now its full light beams, and you may see clearly by its illumination. But you! you are a puzzle—a mystery—a sphinx! There is nothing that I know of you certain—with one exception—I know that you love me."

"And what more do you want to know?"

"But veiled as your character is by mystery, how can I be certain even that you love me? Perhaps I am making hope do the work of reason."

"Foolish child!" he exclaimed, laughing; "who is the sceptic now? You know I love you—I know you love me. What better guarantee can destiny give us that it will make us happy? Clear up that troubled face of yours. You are listening to the wind. With your weird imagination you are making its syllables lamentable prophecies. So could I if I chose. But it is my pleasure that its clamorous tongue should tell me only one tale, and that is—your love."

"The tale is no fiction."

"What does it tell you? Hark!" he held up his forefinger with his eyes fixed on mine.

"Do not make me listen," I answered. "The wind at night has always a mournful intelligence to my ears. Do you remember

that terrible storm on the night when Mrs. Merton was murdered? I heard warning voices in the air long before the lightning streamed. They were but thin-air echoes, sobs and mutterings as if a legion of spectres were sailing swiftly beyond the reach of the tempest; but never did sounds seem more portentous. Since that night I have found a kind of terror in listening to the wind."

"We are not identical in our tastes. That is a good augury for our future. I don't think it well for husband and wife to be too much alike. I often find myself quarrelling with myself for my opinions, and on such occasions knowing that your opinions were mine, I should extend my anger to you. Is not here an acute piece of logic! But I was going to tell you that I like listening to the wind. It is one of those plastic abstractions which agreeably fit themselves to any mood you are in. Sometimes I find it a wonderful type of the public—capricious, many-tongued, but enormously powerful. Sometimes it charms and instructs and inspires me with its moralising, which is deeper than any I can find in books. When I am wakeful it will tell me stories, often exciting enough to keep me amused; frequently so dull that I fall asleep. The other

night it told me a strange story. Would you like to hear it?"

"Yes."

"There was once upon a time a man—hold! what am I going to tell you? It will keep you listening for the same murderous fiction to night, and we shall have you pale-eyed in the morning for want of sleep."

"Tell me the story."

"No. It is too weird for you in your present state of mind. And besides, I should but mar the beauty of the narrative by my clumsy recitation. There is no fictionist more dramatic than the wind. How could I reproduce its wonderful colouring of sobs, and laughter, and short screams, and long and lamentable sighs? These are the touches with which it makes its fictions real. You show a sad want of taste in not liking to hear the wind, Kate. To be sure it has one drawback in common with most orators, particularly those who declaim from the pulpit: it continues when you have had enough. But it is a great genius. It is your only real tragedian. I have heard it act Lear and Cordelia and the Fool at one time in the upper sky, until my hair has stood on an end. It will mouth now and then, and in certain passages it has a tendency to bluster

and will even tear a passion into tatters. But it compensates for these trifling defects by possessing the highest quality of genius—that of suggestiveness. Depend upon it, you miss much enjoyment in not choosing to listen to the wind. Surely it is an undaunted, splendid orator—rather exacting in its claims upon our admiration perhaps, for it snatches men's hats off whether they will or not, and tosses them in the air, as if they were mad with enthusiasm—because I suppose the fools will not throw their hats up themselves and huzza the eloquence as it deserves. And can you be surprised at its rudeness when you hear the fluent rubbish which *will* make men toss their hats and roar with delight?"

"What odd fancies strike you."

"I was going to say if I were the wind I should exult in demolishing—not everything, but what deserves to come down. I'd shake the gibbets first, tear them up, and might even be tempted to fling one of the beams at the head of Jack Ketch, and thus remove a mote out of the eye of civilization. Then I would bend my transparent power against some of the villainous works of art which disfigure our cities and so create opportunities for talent. I would take very deadly aim at the clustering

dens of the poor, that the newspapers might tell what misery, squalor, sin, and starvation crouched under the roofs I had whipped off. I would spare every sailor afloat, but it would give me especial pleasure to learn from the graveyards the most dismal dirges which the echoes among the tombs could teach, that I might chant them in my hollowest voice at the windows of the selfish, the vain, the purse-proud; at the windows of the miser, of the sleek and marble-hearted parson, of the alderman drowsy with turtle, of the matron planning a match between her sad-eyed daughter and some gouty old driveller!.....But come, Kate, this is not making love, this is philosophising—and were ever two things more opposed? See now what it is to marry a man of forty. If I were young I should be talking poetry to you—and you would prefer it."

"I would not. I can read better poetry than any man can talk to me."

"Remember, to-morrow morning at nine o'clock. Mr. Whitefoot (the clergyman) made me a promise to keep the matter a secret; so we shall have no audience. Not that it would make any difference to me if the church were crammed; but since we are to be married privately let us try to observe privacy. It will

be known all over Ashleigh before twelve o'clock that we are married; and they may stare then who can see us."

At this point his capricious mood changed, and he grew tender and caressing.

I sat with him, as I have said, until a late hour, feeling more love for him in my heart than I can find words to express. And lovable he was when he dropped his semi-bantering tone and became gentle. Language cannot describe the exquisite softness of his endearments, made softer yet by contrast with the sense of power that was conveyed by his face and form. His, indeed, was just the sort of intellectual vigour which a woman would admire. Emphatic, keen, dominant, yet without the least aggression in his lawful assumption of superiority, courteous without blandness, cynical without being sinister, with wit whose acerbity was qualified into the relishable accessory of a condiment by his manifest love of what was true and healthy and honest in life; he seemed to me to combine the qualities which I should have chosen for my ideal of a gentleman. Nor were these virtues obscured by the mystery which overshadowed them; it was his heart that was made vague by his melancholy—his inner

life, of which my love craved to interpret the enigma.

And that night at least I determined to make one brave movement in the direction of this solution. I had not the faintest conception of what I proposed to seek; I was not even sure that I should have the courage to prosecute my mission. My sole object was to satisfy myself by an examination that there lurked nothing in the old house to account for his melancholy and his frequent visits to it. I loved this man fondly, devotedly; his life was made appealing to me by the presence of a deep and enduring melancholy; and there was no danger I would not have risked, no horror I would not have encountered, no anger I would not have incurred, to have eased him of his weight of sorrow. I had long felt assured that this melancholy was in some mysterious way identified with the old part of the house, and more especially with the Angels' Court. Was it a delusion, or was the cause of his trouble some reality that lived there? That was the question. My belief was that the source of his melancholy was a delusion. What I expected to see I did not know—I could not conceive. If I had any expectation at all, it was expectation of seeing

nothing. But that was no reason for my refusing to make the excursion. On the contrary, I *wanted* to see nothing in order that I might be sure he was deluded by his imagination. I chose that night because I seemed to find a peculiar fitness on the eve of my marriage with him for making a bold and vigorous attempt to probe to the heart the mystery which made his life wretched. And, indeed, if the idea had crossed my mind at any other season, I should still have been obliged to choose the night; for I risked his discovering me in the day-time, and I had no wish for him ever to know the thing I had attempted.

It was twelve o'clock before I bade Mr. Merton good-night. I went to my bedroom and there lingered until I heard his footsteps on the gallery, and his door shut. The wind howled distractingly, and I thought with a sinking heart, but with unabated resolution, of the echoes it would be awaking in the silent rooms and long corridors of the old house.

When twenty minutes had elapsed, after which I might be sure that Mr. Merton would not leave his room, I stealthily opened my door and crept softly down stairs. The wind was so violent that it at least afforded me the

protection of noise, under which I might move without fear of being overheard. The hall was pitch-dark; no gleam of moon or star could penetrate the inky pall of cloud that stretched across the sky. The flickering of the candle-flame gave a movement to the objects I passed, and they seemed to be alive. I walked straight to the door of the ante-room, the handle of which I gently turned, and found the door locked. For this I was in a measure prepared, though I had hoped to find it open; for it forced upon me the grim alternative of having to pass through the room in which Mrs. Merton was murdered. Through that suite of rooms, and through those occupied by Mr. Merton, only, was access to be had to the old house; for the door communicating with the dressing-room Laura had slept in was locked inside.

My spirits sank, and I shuddered at the idea of traversing that saddest chamber of all the house. But I had made up my mind to achieve my task; and I was not to be hindered by any superstitious terrors.

The bedroom door was locked; but then I knew where to find the key. I crossed the hall and entered a little room at the back of the drawing-room which had been allotted

me by Mr. Merton when I became housekeeper, though the housekeeper's room was in reality in the basement. Here, against the wall, were suspended my files of bills; here was the linen chest, &c.; and here were the keys of the spare rooms in the west wing. Taking the bedroom key off the hook, I made my way as cautiously as I might upstairs. My heart thumped in my breast when I applied and turned the key. Never since Mrs. Merton's death had living creature, to my knowledge, crossed the threshold of that room. I entered, leaving the door open—I had not the courage to close it after me. In the pale gleams of the candlelight the apartment looked terribly sombre and ghostly. The great bed was covered with a white sheet. The heavy curtains completely draped the windows, against which the violent wind poured its shrill tide, making the darkness hideous with its hooting. The spectre with which I had so often vitalised this room of death seemed to brood over it in the deep shadows upon the ceiling and in the corners. Quick! let me escape from this atmosphere made difficult to the lungs by the want of sunlight and the renewal of its current, and by the memories of death and pain with which it was surcharged.

There was the mirror into which she had so often looked. It reflected my shadow as I passed; and I could almost fancy that I saw a face staring at me from the polished darkling surface.

I went hastily forward, trembling in every limb. Back! back! my fears kept crying: you are overtasking your energies. If thus terrified at the onset, what will be your terror as you advance! But love urged me to go on! and reason came to the rescue with its appeals, and bade me have no fear, for there was nothing to terrify me but what my own fancies should create.

I reached the door of the further dressing-room, opened it, and with the candle flaring in the chill current of air, descended and reached the corridor. I was now in the old part of the house. I paused and listened. The air was full of murmurs, vague reverberations of the echoes awakened by the gale; but they only served to illustrate the profound and death-like stillness without disturbing it.

Why should places that are familiar possess such terrors for us in the dark? Darkness is but a physical sensation. Why should our souls submit to the cozenage of our eyes? Do the blind, who live in darkness, feel these

fears? I felt ashamed of myself for the nameless terrors which possessed me; and yet how real those terrors were my dilated eyes, my pale cheeks, my trembling hands sufficiently testified.

What had I come to seek? What horror might not one of the many rooms I was to enter, exhibit to me?

Here was I alone in these gloomy chambers, in the grim stillness of the night, amid which the wind-echoes murmured like sounds heard in a dream; bent on a mission of which I could not conceive the issue. If my candle should go out! If hysteria seized me and I should swoon! I was sorely tempted to turn back; but such was the tension of my nerves that the very fear that played upon them served but to irritate them; and with an emotion of anger at my cowardice I walked forwards.

I reached the end of the passage, and pushed open the door. My instincts pointed to the Angels' Court. *There* and no where else, I felt intuitively certain, must exist the Cause, be it imagined or veritable, of Mr. Merton's suffering. I would hasten there at once. I would descend, if I could, into the court and satisfy myself at least that not

there, if elsewhere, lurked the spell which drew Mr. Merton daily to these gloomy, chilly regions. I passed the several rooms which intervened, narrowly observant as I went, valiant, so to speak, in the very extremity of fear, so true it is that extremes meet, and—

I stopped dead! What was this I tasted in the air?

Fire! a smell of burning! an atmosphere charged with smoke! I pushed open another door, and fell back before a volume of smoke, that rolled languidly out with the current of air.

The smoke came from the Angels' Court, for the door of the chamber I had now entered opened into it.

Quick as thought, I turned and fled. With flying steps I retraced my way through the rooms, the candle flaring in my hand, and peopling the walls with spectres, which menaced me with shadowy arms as I passed, gained the staircase, up which I sprang, and entered Mrs. Merton's bedroom.

The door was open as I had left it, but a figure stood on the threshold. In the dim light shed by the candle, I did not, for the moment, recognise Mr. Merton. I uttered a

cry and halted. He came towards me. May God spare me from ever again looking upon such a face as he presented. His eyes were wide open; his lips were parted; the terror in his face worked in it with a hundred expressions, each shocking to see.

"Who are you? What do you here?" he asked, in a voice so hollow, that I should not have known him by it.

"Oh, sir, I am Kate Malcolmson; do you not know me? There is a smell of burning below—the old house is filled with smoke—there is a fire."

"Fire?" he muttered, like one in a dream. "This house?"

"I am sure it is in the Angels' Court."

"God confound it!" he cried, the whole life of the man leaping into him on a sudden. "How do you know?"

"I have just come from there."

"Stay here, then; guard this door; make no noise. Let no one pass nor attempt to follow me yourself. Promise this."

"I promise."

He snatched the candle out of my hand, and sped away, leaving me in total darkness.

Twenty minutes—to me they were twenty

hours—elapsed. The wind thundered continuously outside, and screamed through the hall like mad women singing. Presently a light gleamed at the end of the room, and Mr. Merton entered, shading the candle flame with his hand, which threw a black shadow before it, but illuminated him clearly, so that in his white face and shirt he resembled an apparition. He marched past me without a word, and when he was in the gallery, called :

" Come out of that room."

I went out trembling, for there was bitter wrath in his voice. He closed the door, locked it, and thrust the key in his pocket; then giving me the candle to hold, he told me to wait until he got his coat. He soon returned, and taking the candle, raised it over his head, fell back, and eyed me from top to toe.

" In the name of the Devil, how is it you are not in bed ?" he exclaimed. " What were you doing in the Angels' Court ?"

" I did not reach the Angels' Court. I smelt fire, and ran back to give the alarm."

" Fire ! rubbish ! there was no fire."

" The rooms were full of smoke."

" Of dust. Smoke ! I should have smelt

it soon enough. Do you walk in your sleep? Did you go to those rooms in a dream? No wonder you smell smoke in a nightmare. I think you will drive me raving mad, Kate. My forehead is wet with perspiration. What sent you on this midnight quest?"

"My love," I answered, entreatingly, "I wanted to find, if I could, some reason for your melancholy——"

"Great heaven! will you never let my melancholy be? What did you expect to find? I almost wish some dismaller fancy than fire had terrified you, that you might abandon such fool's errands for the future. Do you tell me that you did not reach the Angels' Court?"

"Yes. I got as far as the room that lies next to it, but the smoke drove me back."

"Smoke! I tell you it was the dust, and your fancy, and the shadows produced by the candle combined. There is no smoke there. There is no smell of burning. This is waking on the eve of marriage with a vengeance! I should have heard you before, had the wind not raised such a cursed outcry. This door banged, and that brought me out of bed. What was I to think on seeing this door open? that there was a ghost in the house

indeed! Freaks of this kind drive people out of their wits. If you do not leave my melancholy alone, you will cause my death."

"I am very sorry," I answered, beginning to cry. "I am a fool to act in this way. You will hate me now, and that is all the return my ill-advised love deserves."

"I won't hate you for this once. I will forgive you. You have met with a fright and been taught a lesson. But, Kate, I shall hate you indeed if you continue playing me more of these tricks."

"I never will. Forgive me."

He pressed his lips to my cheek.

"There! go to bed now. You will have to be up early in the morning."

He pushed open my bedroom door; I entered; he closed it upon me, and I heard him return to his own chamber.

Such was the issue of what he properly termed my midnight quest, and in this wise had every effort I made to master his secret been defeated. I am sure that at first he was in a great passion; but he had grown calmer when I told him that I had not reached the Angels' Court. *There* was the mystery! What did he mean by saying there was no smoke? Was it possible that the strong smell

of burning, the volume of smoke which had rolled in when I opened the door and turned the flame of my candle dim, could have been my fancy? And yet when I reflected on the cool way in which he had treated the alarm, his contemptuous rebuke of my fears, I was seriously disposed to think that once more my fancy had made a dupe of me. If there had been a fire, how had he extinguished it? Where could he have procured water? There were no indications of his having been engaged with such an enemy as fire; and surely had there been fire, indications of his efforts to smother it would have appeared in his white shirt and hands. It was shocking to think that imagination had fooled me again; shocking to think on the absolute materiality of the false impressions I had received. If this were not madness, it was so akin to madness that I might well shudder at the approximation. Certainly Mr. Merton would end in thinking me mad if I persisted in my resolution to ascertain the secret of his melancholy. Why might not I be deluded myself in thinking *him* so? If my imagination were powerful enough to hear groans and see spectres in stillness and daylight, and to taste and smell smoke and burning, when

there was no fire—nothing but a dusty atmosphere set in motion by currents of air, and made thick by the bleared and ineffectual gleams of the candlelight—it would be active enough to conceive him melancholy and the victim of a delusion, although the reverse were the case.

I remember bitterly deploring that I had ever allowed myself to enter the old house. But regrets were too late now. I could only comfort myself by remembering that he had kissed and forgiven me, and by making myself a solemn promise that never more would I attempt to unravel the mystery—which, if due to my fancy, made my belief ridiculous and discreditable, and which, if a real cause existed, he was plainly determined that it should not be disclosed.

CHAPTER VII.

I AM MARRIED.

BEFORE half-past nine o'clock next morning we were married. We had walked to the church at Ashleigh, in order to escape the observation which we should hardly fail to have excited had we driven there. It was a cold, raw, depressing morning, with a high complaining wind that penetrated to the very bones, and a dull, leaden-coloured sky. My mood was a complex one. Sad I could not be; yet mine was not the light-hearted happiness that should have accompanied me to the altar. The events of the past night weighed heavily upon my spirits, and I mourned the fatuity that had set me to work to make myself despondent when I should, that morning, have been the happiest girl in Christendom.

Mr. Merton was tender, calm, self-collected in his manner. Once only had he spoken of the preceding night, and his allusion was made in his familiar, half-bantering manner.

"Come, confess that you saw a ghost, but that you would not own to it, and invented instead a story of smoke to account for your sudden flight."

I answered that my story of smoke was no invention. "I believed that I saw smoke, though whether it were smoke or not I won't declare now. Of course you would know. I was terribly frightened as soon as I entered Mrs. Merton's bedroom; and I can believe that such fears as mine play desperate tricks with reason. But don't let us talk of it. To be persuaded like this against the evidence of one's senses is dreadful."

So the subject was dropped; indeed had it been continued I should have burst into tears; and I don't suppose Mr. Merton would have cared much to lead a red-eyed girl to the altar.

The church was empty when we arrived; but before the service was over two or three persons dropped in. No doubt they could hardly credit at first that they were witnessing the marriage of Mr. Merton, the rich

owner of Ashleigh Manor. They must have fancied that they were viewing a servant's wedding. As we passed into the vestry-room, Mr. Merton whispered—

"There be gossips enough to fill the town with the news before we have reached home. People will wonder, but I want no friends about me."

We signed our names, and having received the congratulations of the clergyman, left the church. The carriage had been ordered to meet us. It was at the corner of the street. We entered it, and were driven home.

Thus was disposed of in half-an-hour a piece of business of which the anticipation had made my nights restless for three weeks, and would have done so, probably, for three years, had my engagement lasted so long.

I was more light-hearted on my return than I was on the going. My husband—for so I must henceforth call him—was very loving and tender—far more lover-like than he had ever been before; apparently so happy himself that I could not look into his eyes, softened and glowing with emotion, without feeling very happy too. Yet I could not help regretting that we were not going to leave Ashleigh Manor for awhile, though I had

told him I had no wish to do so. Of late the house had become pregnant with certain associations of which I could have desired to suspend in us both the memory by absence, so that they might in a measure have faded before our return. Love makes us very candid. The thought was in my mind, and I could not help expressing it.

"Sorry we are not going away!" he exclaimed, echoing my words. "I thought you were so fond of Ashleigh Manor that you did not like the idea of leaving it?"

"I should not like the idea of leaving it for any length of time. But I would not mind going away with you for three or four months."

"Did not my picture of a travelled honeymoon convince you?"

"We need not cross the seas—we might go to Scotland."

"So we will some of these days. But what a capricious little creature you are! What makes you want to be running away all on a sudden? Does your bondage weigh so heavily upon you already that you are for spreading your wings and flying northwards?"

"No; I want to take you and myself away

from certain memories. By the time we return we shall have forgotten the things we left behind us."

"What things? what memories?"

"I hardly know how to explain. My prejudices are more feelings than facts. But last night holds some memories I should be glad to forget."

"You tell me I am an enigma—but you are more enigmatical than I. What is there in the events of last night you wish to forget?"

"Your anger, for one thing, and my disobedience, for another."

"Is that all?" he answered, laughing. "Can't we forget them without going to Scotland?"

"Ashleigh Manor will keep you in mind of them; and while you remember them you will not love me as you should."

"I *do* love you as I should—and as you would have me. And I can love you better at home than abroad; because at home we can have rest and calm, and be together; but if we travel, all my time will be taken up in looking after the luggage and bullying the waiters, and I shan't have any leisure to love you.

But his reasoning did not satisfy me. In truth, I had another motive for wishing to travel with him—I wanted to wean him away from his melancholy. But this I dared not mention. The carriage entered the avenue, and our conversation was cut short.

If ever mortal in this world had reason to be happy I had. I had been lifted into a position to which my fancy, two years before, even in its most ambitious mood, would never have dared to tower. I was virtually mistress of perhaps the noblest property in that part of the country. The wealth, the servants, the splendid luxury which novelists are so fond of lavishing upon their heroines, were really and without exaggeration, mine. And lastly I was the wife of a man whom I loved better as I knew him better, and who, I believed, loved me with the tempered passion which succeeds the unreasonable emotions of youth.

Surrounded then by conditions so inspiriting, it would have been hard if I had not been happy; hard on myself, on my husband, and in particular, hard on that liberal Fortune who had done all she could to satisfy me. I abandoned myself to my dream and lived for a time a life of perfect happiness, unalloyed by a single

apprehension of trouble. Indeed, at this time I could have found no excuse for any such apprehension. My husband had told me, before I became his wife, that he would be happier after he was married; and happier he unquestionably became. His conversation took a more cheerful tone; his laughter was less forced, more mirthful; his smiles ceased to be what they had heretofore suggested, lights playing over the surface of his melancholy and illustrating, without brightening, its gloom: they seemed really the expression of a light and even a gay heart. I was charmed and gratified by this change in him. I now felt sure that the cause of his melancholy must have been a delusion which had been extinguished by some psychological process inconceivable to another mind, by his marriage. For I reasoned that if the occasion of his melancholy were material, it would still abide and still produce those mental effects which had darkened and even deformed his character.

I was too happy, and too confident to watch him with the keenness I had it in my power to employ whilst my love was hidden away from him; or I must have noticed from time to time a forced air of gaiety which might have led

me to suspect that his cheerfulness was not so genuine as it appeared, and that its expression might be due rather to the operation of his powerful will than to his heart. I recalled his conduct at this time in after days, and then these moods of gaiety recurred to me and I understood them. But such was my love that it may be literally believed that I lived and moved and had my being in him. He exercised over me an intellectual fascination beyond my power to describe. The mystic incorporation of the altar was, indeed, in my case no mere symbol of affinity. I was his in that spiritual sense which is best made intelligible by a reference to the mesmeric influence which a stronger mind sometimes exerts over a weaker. I remember once reading a story of the effect of such an influence as I am here indicating possessed by a man of lawless passions and sinister desires over a young girl of spotless purity of heart and life. With wonderful force the writer described the gradual absorption of the girl's pure nature by the malevolent spirit of the man; how inexorably the influence once obtained was exerted; how this man led the young adoring girl from the very threshold, as it were, of heaven into abysms into which the imagination refused to follow her. My

mind was prosaic in the days when I read this story; and though I was impressed by the genius of the writer, I held his parable absurd, monstrous, inhuman. But when I became Mr. Merton's wife, it recurred to me with the force of a revelation. Now could I realise the sort of influence the writer had described. The girl's character made supernaturally weird by its submission to an influence so baleful, was humanised to me by sympathy; for I too felt the force of the influence which in the fiction had filled me with doubt and disgust: and so powerless did the magnetic nature of my husband's love make me, that I felt, like the poor girl in the story, I must follow him from the heaven of innocence to the lowest hell into which he might choose to descend, if he did but beckon me. Whether such a love as this be commendable or not I will not affect to decide. A refined conception of a loving woman would probably consider her passion as living beside but not in the heart of the object of her devotion; linked to him by a hundred fine and spiritual ties which should be elastic enough to stretch from purity to vice: so that she might remain noble and innocent, but still be linked to her lover, however low he might fall from that high virtue which won

her love. But such a conception of love is hard to realise. It is conditional, not absolute. "Thy God shall be my God, thy people my people!" was the cry of a love which surely lacked nothing of purity because it was willing to sacrifice its prejudices, its instincts, and its faith. If love be qualified by exceptions can it remain love? If a woman is not prepared to yield up *all* for a man, is her love of much worth? It is for the man to appreciate, to receive tenderly and reverently, to put to noble uses, to direct to holy issues, the wonderful and precious gift of a woman's love. But *she* may not bargain. She may only confide. For if she bargains she distrusts; and if she distrusts, of what value is her love?

But if my love for my husband had been as cautious and disciplined as the emotional friendship which many married people mistake for love, I could have found nothing but what I could honour and admire. Brought as I now was into closer contact with his mind, I noted points in his character which had before escaped me; illustrations too delicate for ordinary observation to detect. His behaviour to me was perfectly refined. Almost never now did his conversation deviate into those good-natured personalities with which he had been

wont to enliven his chats with me. To the position to which he had raised me he imparted an additional dignity by his lofty and courteous, but unstudied bearing. He seemed proud of me, and his pride made me proud.

In this blissful dream the winter slipped away, and the early spring came to replace the gray clouds with skies of blue, soft like all Nature's promises are. During the first few weeks of my married life I had had no wish to break the joyous spell of my happiness by attempting to lead my husband back again into the society from which he had withdrawn himself. But as the time rolled by I began to think that it would be to my interest if I could succeed in getting him to return, in person, the visits which the neighbours had made us. I fancied—though I had too much conceit to believe—that he would grow weary of me, if the monotony of our intercourse were not relieved by such distractions as society in the country has to offer. Moreover, now that I was getting used to my position as mistress of Ashleigh Manor, I became a little exacting in my wishes. I wanted people to see something of me—to become acquainted with the lady whom Mr. Merton had thought fit to make his wife. I

considered that if we remained isolated Mr. Merton's friends would probably imagine that he was ashamed of his wife, and wanted to keep her hidden. I suppose I had to thank Lady Callender for my sensitiveness to public opinion.

One day I asked my husband if he would like to call with me on the Steares. I took the first name that occurred to me, as an excuse to open the subject.

"Why the Steares?" he asked. "Why not" —and he began a catalogue of names.

"Well, why not? Now that you are married you don't mean to immure yourself as you have hitherto done?"

"What difference does marriage make? Does not a man laugh, and cry, and see, and hear, and lose blood if a tooth's drawn, and scream if you pinch him, as well when he's married as when he isn't? I hope, Kate, you are not going to ask me to give parties and go into the world again?"

"But why shouldn't you?"

"Well, then, by-and-by."

"Do you mean when you are an old man? You won't care for society then. You will grow peevish and gouty, and the chit-chat of society will annoy you."

"What's the use of society? I never found any pleasure in it. It's too hollow and insincere for me. I never danced in my life: I don't care a fig for amateur piano playing and squeaking; I take no interest in the heedless small-talk that hums about the rooms like a horde of mosquitos. Indeed, society—what is called society: rooms choked to suffocation, hot men, pale women, bashful girls glued to the walls, imbecile youths blocking up the doorway:—this sort of thing teases me. I see so much going on that offends me—indecorous dancers, brazen-faced flirts, bad wives,—don't lead me into those whirlpools. I am very well, and so are you. Let us take the goods the gods provide us, and keep our ease while we can."

"You always draw such caricatures of life. If you chose you could paint a ball as prettily as you now make it ridiculous."

"But what do you want with society? Have you a mind to dance? Give me leave to say I am as jealous as Othello, and if I were to see any lackered frump kicking his heels about you, I'd do—I'd do—I know not what I'd do! But I'd do something."

"It is not for me, it is for you that I want society."

"What now? Come, you can't pretend to think me melancholy?"

"No, I have another reason: I am afraid you will get tired of me if you see no other face but mine."

"Is that your fear? So you want society to keep your face blooming in my mind! If that is your object, then, be careful to assemble only the ugly, the old, and the maimed: Miss Graves, who squints; Lady Smart, with a nose like a wen; old Mrs. Drummond and her mahogany-coloured daughter."

"Oh!" answered I, pertly; "I shouldn't be afraid to invite the prettiest girls."

"Of course you shouldn't; yet I don't quite see your logic. You want me to go in for the study of contrasts?"

"I want you to see more faces than one."

"But if you are so afraid of one face palling upon me, why shouldn't I be equally afraid of one face palling upon you?"

"Oh, palling is not the word. I wish I could express myself like you, then I could make you understand exactly what I mean. But you understand already, I'm sure—I can tell by your smile."

"Well, my pet, I won't pretend that I don't

understand *you:* but neither will I pretend that I understand your reasoning. View the matter broadly. I am happy alone with you. I want no other society. You wish to persuade me that I do, just as you once wished to persuade me that I was the victim of some monstrous delusion. But your convictions don't alter the truth. Society is very well for people who like it. I am not one of those people. I like society under certain conditions—in London for instance, where I can pick out a few choice spirits, and find pleasure in their company. But the society here is poor, in an intellectual sense. You can learn nothing from it; it cannot relish you. It estimates you by certain petty and humiliating standards of its own, which I for one resist. If I thought *you* were desirous of society I would make an effort to keep it, for your sake; but in that wise little heart of yours I know there lurks no such desire. I have studied your character pretty closely, and flatter myself I am tolerably well versed in it; my experience of society makes me certain that it would bore you. The first ball I should bring you home from would be setting you begging me not to take you to another. The bother of dressing, of being civil, of reciprocating non-

sense, of sitting up late, of returning home worn out! and the greater bother of entertaining! of seeing that all your guests are enjoying themselves, heaven help them! of getting that stubborn man to dance with that plain girl; of finding time to whisper commonplace civilities to the old folks who will go home insulted, if in the hurry and distraction of keeping everybody happy and smiling you overlook them; of receiving sour thanks for a delightful evening from women who have not danced, and who will withdraw to shed tears of spite and vexation! There is no trouble so lamentable as the trouble of pleasure-making."

"But there is no need to entertain or to go out. I only want you to make a few visits with me."

"Visits lead to balls and dinner-parties. They are the good intentions which pave the road to Jehanum. If you visit people and decline their invitations they will think you—a milkmaid and me a cow-keeper."

"Well, I will say no more about it. I find I am dreadfully ignorant of the usages of the world."

"Keep so and be happy. The truest wisdom lies in such ignorance. Would you ex-

change your ignorance for Miss Callender's knowledge?"

"No," I answered, laughing, "not if I were obliged to use it as she does."

"You'd find that you couldn't help using it as she does. It would dictate to you the same actions, words, simpers and glances and little mirthless laughs, and pensive looks with which she indulges the world, and particularly her colloquist. And what it dictates you would have to obey, or else turn a deaf ear, in which case you might as well remain ignorant."

He took a stride across the room, and returning to me, laid his hand on my shoulder.

"I wish," he said tenderly, "to abstract my little one's sympathies as much as I can from the world, for the less the world colours her thoughts the purer and the dearer she will be to me."

"My happiness lies in loving you and believing in your love," I answered, moved by the exquisite softness of his voice. "You are my world. I have no wish for any world beyond you in this life."

"You believe in me? You think me noble-minded, true-hearted, and honest?"

"Yes. I believe you this and more."

He withdrew his hand, and turned his head aside. Anon looking at me, he said:

"When my darling Laura was living, it was my great happiness to be with her, because the deep faith she had in me, the love, the devotion she felt for me, made me feel a just and good man. There is nothing more consecrating than the faith of innocence. God never appeared to me a more merciful Being than when I would hear Laura praying. Even her mother would seem beautiful in my sight when Laura had kissed her. Innocence is full of benedictions. It blesses all who come near it. I would have you innocent as Laura was, that you may bless my life by your faith in me. I want you to think me good and noble and pure. The seriousness of your belief will save me from all sense of irony. You will stand between me and myself as Laura stood. God alone knows what I suffered when He took her from me."

"Cannot I be what Laura was to you? I wish to be—I will be—nay, I will be more; for my love for you is of the kind no child can know."

"I believe it," he said. "Yet Laura did not want society. She found me enough."

"And so do I. Do not let us talk of

society. If you do not wish for it, I do not."

"I wish to be alone—with you. My life has been so long self-contained that any intrusion upon it by people with whom I have no sympathy would harass and pain me. I have admitted you—a new light, a new life—*you* suffice me?"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE OLD MELANCHOLY RETURNS.

BUT there came before long a change over my dream of happiness. What is that joy which lasts for ever, of which the poet sings? What is that thing of beauty which is imperishable? Memory may preserve joys as flowers are preserved in the leaves of a book, which we carry with us to the grave. But there they end. And are not the joys which memory preserves illusions—the shadows of things that have been? The real joys themselves are dead. A greater than Keats has told us that there is no greater grief than the recollection of happiness in moments of sorrow. What, then, is the joy that lasts for ever? A material joy—a picture, a poem, a star—it cannot be; for these things die to us when we die. It cannot be an intellectual joy—the

memory of love, of a noble deed, of gratitude, of hope—for what is the joy that outlives the heart? I have had my joy—where is it now? It was a thing of beauty to me—has it lasted for ever? I look upwards and around me and find it not; I look back into the past and find it there; but it is joy no longer. Memory makes it bitter, delusive, unreal. Memory makes it a satire on my hopes; a caricature of my dreams. It is irony acrid as gall and cruel as the grave.

I noticed one day a sudden alteration in my husband's manner. It seemed as if the tide of memory which had been kept back by love had forced its barriers, and had overwhelmed his heart in its inky flood. The old familiar melancholy had rushed again into his face, and expressed itself there under the shadow of a strange, immitigable frown.

What had happened to cause this change? It could not be due to me. I had said, I had done nothing that could in any wise account for it. No reference to his melancholy, to the Angels' Court, to his delusion, to any of the topics whose discussion he had always deprecated and even resented, had escaped me. Indeed I could have found no excuse for recurring to them; for up to this time his

melancholy had been greatly subdued, his love genial and cheerful, and I had detected nothing, whether in his actions or his conversation, to lead me to conclude that the mysterious influence which had for so long a period attracted him to the chambers of the old house, still existed.

I had noticed the alteration in him during breakfast. He had been risen nearly three quarters of an hour before I left my bedroom, though this, indeed, was his regular habit, for he was not one of your gentlemen who waste three or four hours over their toilets. He liked, he would tell me, to take some exercise in the grounds before breakfast; and I know he did so, for, as I have gone down stairs on quitting my bedroom I have met him, just entered from a walk.

I did not like to appear to notice his manner at first, though its obtrusion must have made it manifest to him that I did so. He ate no breakfast. He was so restless that he could not long keep his chair, but would rise with an apology to me for leaving the table, and stride uneasily about the room. Upon his face rested the old familiar shadow, which was made darker now by contrast with the happier countenance it had left revealed

since his marriage. His voice was dull and sullen. His eyes were keen with an expression of painful vigilance. He suggested the aspect of a man who either forebodes or awaits some heavy calamity. As I watched him the shadow that rested upon my face overcrept my heart; my spirits seemed to be hushed in the sense of an evil menacing, though remote. Up alongside of him again sprang the demon Superstition, whom I had hoped, I had believed, Love had laid for ever. Once more (I thought with bitterness and pain)—once more the delusion that had made him miserable for so long a time has returned to take possession of the throne it had vacated. Heretofore Love had made brilliant his nature, and all the man had seemed revealed to me, sharp, clear-outlined, radiant. But now was gathered about him again that cloud of mystery which I had fondly deemed I had lifted, and which was never more to descend; the keen presentment of his noble self grew obscure; a shadow, a darkness had suddenly rolled between him and me; and I cursed the return of that Mystery which was to keep us asunder, as the sun's glory is obscured from him who looks upwards by a pale but impenetrable cloud.

"You are making no breakfast," I said to him at last. "You do not look well? I am sure you do not feel well."

"I am well, Kate, quite well. Finish your breakfast, and do not mind me."

"I cannot help minding you; it makes me miserable to see you dispirited."

"Oh, the most philosophic of men have their sullen moods. Only children can be happy all day long. Why do you watch me so intently?"

"I see a change in you. The alteration makes me miserable. It renews feelings which I had hoped were passed away for ever."

"You see me a little dull. There should be nothing in that to make you miserable. Long ago I told you that my temperament was naturally melancholic. There is a luxury in melancholy which you must not deny me indulging myself in. But you will do so if you show so much concern when I happen to look a little despondent. How do you know that I am not an epicure in moods as some men are in meats? Goldsmith makes his Chinaman meet, one day, a shabby man seated with an air of profound dejection. The honest Citizen was so much moved by the poor fellow's distress that he was tempted

to offer him a piece of money, which, however, the disconsolate individual declined. After a short conversation, the shabby man asked the Citizen home to dinner. The Citizen, much surprised, accepted the invitation. The pauper took him to a great house, seated him at a magnificent repast, and there avowed that his only object in courting contempt abroad was that he might feel with keener gust the pleasure of authority and luxury at home. That is false philosophy, but it is innocent. How do you know, when you offer me the alms of pity, that you are not pressing your bounty on a man rich in happiness, but who wishes to make contrast serve for a condiment, that he may relish his happiness more after imagining himself into despondency?"

"Supposing your depression to be only an unworthy epicurean device, how long is it to last? I shall be willing to believe that you are the epicure you represent yourself, if you are happy again in an hour's time."

"Oh, I cannot alternate between happiness and despondency so rapidly as that."

"But you have eaten no breakfast. Imaginary sorrow does not take away the appetite."

"Imagination must play its part well, or it is worthless," he replied. "If imaginary

sorrow does not affect me as real sorrow would, of what use is the counterfeit ?"

"Oh, husband, do not deceive me! Tell me the truth. Tell me that you are dispirited from a real cause. I will not ask what the cause is, if you wish to keep it secret."

"Kate," he answered, turning from me, "you are too sympathetic. You live too much in and for me. Such a life is unwholesome. You must not suffer your mind to lose its individuality by merging into mine. I am twenty years your senior. The wisdom of youth in me has been corrupted by experience; my qualities are not akin to yours: our tastes, in many cases, may be identical, but we have not the same mode of gratifying them. The spiritual fusion of our being would benefit me but injure you. I want you to remain something apart from myself. I wish you to partake of none of my infirmities. I want you to be my good angel, with the light of purity still upon you, that when I need you, you may come between me and my thoughts. But if you reflect my spirit, which will be the fatal and certain consequence of too deep a sympathy with me, I shall be able to have no sympathy with, no confidence in you; for there is much in me that I loathe

and abhor, and my aversion would be extended to you, if I found you repeating any of the qualities which I detest in myself."

"But how can I love you if I may not sympathise with you?"

"Sympathy," he answered, "need not be a condition of love. A man may love a woman devotedly, and yet find nothing in her character with which he can sympathise. He may be clever, she may be dull; he may be mild-tempered, she quick-tongued; she may be slow, he energetic. The world would think love between such persons impossible, yet the man might break his heart if she were to deceive him. Where is the sympathy? Love is not a composite emotion. Friendship is, and that involves sympathy. Love is a pure, a primary passion, being to the psychologist what gold is to the metallurgist."

I listened to him in silence, but felt that he was arguing only to convince me, not from any conviction of his own. Had he chosen, he could have taken the opposite view. Here was nothing but the old protest against my assumption that he was melancholy. Here was the old, defiant reasoning, sophistical, plausible, specious with dogmatism, against the impression his behaviour pro-

duced. Why this anxious energy to keep me in the dark? He seized upon dogmas which were not truths, and sophisms which resembled truths, and piled them high between his secret and me, and guarded the entrance with a warmth which gave me clearly to know that no intrusion would be tolerated under any pretext of love. The care with which he held his secret only made its existence more certain. Should I ever discover it? I felt that I should not, because I believed it a delusion, and I felt that he would never betray it.

And why was I so sure that it was a delusion? Why did I not think that his melancholy attached to itself some deeper significance than the supernatural could impart? I answer, because I had woven about him my idealisms—because I had elevated, dignified, made absolute my theory of his abounding goodness of heart, the sterling nobility of his nature, his lofty aversion to wrong, to meanness, to the littlenesses of life. How could I conceive the past of such a man's life to hold any pain of his own procuring, terrible enough to haunt him and overshadow him? To have believed this would have been to shatter the pedestal on which my idol stood.

CHAPTER IX.

THE GLOOM DEEPENS.

HIS sombre mood lasted all that day, and deepened as the evening approached. He made a feint of eating some dinner, but little food in reality passed his lips. Before the servants he tried to mask his depression by chatting with me on any light topic that occurred; but when alone with me he was silent.

That evening, in the drawing-room, I caught him often with his eyes fixed upon me, shining strangely under his contracted brows, and keen with the searching expression which, on more than one occasion, had fired them when bent on my face.

I asked if I should read to him.

No; I was not to allow myself to be troubled. I saw that it vexed him if I

watched, or even appeared to notice him. I therefore kept my eyes on the volume in my lap, pretending to be deeply engrossed in its pages, though I furtively studied him.

Sometimes he would sit; sometimes pace to and fro. Once he left the room, and was absent half an hour. When he returned, he said,

"It is a still night, but cold."

"Have you been out?"

"Yes, breathing the air in the avenue."

"Why did you not ask me to go with you?"

"It is too cold for you."

"You would have asked me yesterday."

"Not if yesterday were not warmer than to-day. Spring in this country admits us with tedious slowness into summer. We call the end of March and April spring, so anxious are we to believe that summer is at hand. May should be called spring by right. Winter has not yet left us, and this is April. The stars are looking down as frostily as they did in December, and my breath makes a cloud in the air."

"I don't think you were wise to go out. I dare say you went without a hat."

"Quite right."

"You will catch cold."

"Be laid up, and perhaps die. Would you like to be left a widow, Kate?"

I disdained to answer the question. He laughed quietly, and said,

"What a world of writing could be collected on the subject of death. And how differently the topic has been treated! Some — the Roman Catholics in particular—make it a very horrible matter. There are two noble essays by Lord Bacon on death. Did you ever read them?"

"No."

"One of them is very grand. I wish to read you a passage."

He left the room. The subject was a gloomy one, and it was made very gloomy by his manner. Yet I was pleased to have him talk to me. He returned presently, holding the volume. He opened it, scanned the page with his eye, and said,

"This is my favourite passage: 'Why should man be in love with his fetters, though of gold? Art thou drowned in security? Then I say, thou art perfectly dead. For though thou movest, yet thy soul is buried within thee, and thy good angel either forsakes his guard or sleeps. There is nothing

under heaven (saving a true friend, who cannot be counted within the number of moveables) unto which my heart doth lean. And this dear freedom hath begotten me this peace, that I mourn not for the end which must be, nor spend one wish to have one minute added to the incertain date of my years.'" He read on a little to himself, closed the book, and fell into deep thought. Before long,

"How does death seem to you? Do you fear it?"

"Yes."

"Ay, death *must* be feared. Fear is the security God gives to life when a human being is born, else if there was not this fear, men and women would be killing themselves, so insupportable is each one's burden."

"But do you think it is as much the fear of death that prevents suicide as the knowledge that it is an unpardonable sin in the eyes of God?"

"Ah, there are few in this world whom the fear of God restrains. But why should not self-murder be lawful? Why should not a man be suffered to hasten the death which sorrow is making inevitable? Is it not cruel to tell a man: 'You may die of a broken heart, but you must not deny heaven the

privilege of inflicting a thousand torments upon you, by killing yourself' ?"

"If his heart break, it is God's act, and we must believe in His mercy and wisdom. By killing himself, a man impiously wrests God's power away, as it were; he defies his Maker."

"But can you make a breaking heart believe in God's mercy and goodness ?"

"If it could believe in them, its pain would leave it. It's belief would make it happy; for such a belief is the only real and enduring happiness the heart can know."

"It may be real happiness," he answered, gloomily, "but how is it to be achieved ? The very nature of some griefs makes the happiness of religion impossible. Conceive the existence of a wrong, the memory of which is breaking the heart. The wrong is irreparable; it stands between the doer and his redemption. He cannot see God through the obscurity it interposes. The voice of religion cannot pierce it. And as the sun of life sinks to its setting, as the evening gathers its shadows, as the material beauty which gave him relief—the song of birds, the azure of the heavens, the perfume and the colour of flowers—as these things fade, so the obscurity

deepens, and a darkness more horrible than that of the grave envelopes him. What consolation has religion to offer that could reach such a man? He has not ears to hear, nor eyes to see. His crime shrouds him from head to foot, and blinds him and deafens him to every voice but that of his tortured and weary conscience. Oh God, have mercy upon him!" he cried, passionately, pressing his hands to his eyes. "He needs mercy! he needs mercy!"

"Of whom do you speak?" I exclaimed, terrified by his language, which seemed dictated by a particular instance.

"Of whom? Of any miserable sinner to whom heaven is a blank, and whose heart is a hell!"

He snatched up the volume he had placed on the table, and read again from it vehemently:

"'Death arrives gracious only to such as sit in darkness, or lie heavily burdened with grief and irons; to the poor Christian that sits bound in the galley; to despairful widows, pensive prisoners, and deposed kings; to them whose fortune runs back, and whose spirits mutiny; unto such death is a redeemer, and the grave a place for retiredness and rest.'

Retiredness and rest! What blessed sounds are those!" he exclaimed, closing the book. "The retiredness and rest of the grave are real. There indeed peace is absolute. We may seek it on the earth, but where shall we find it? In solitude? Not if we have memory. In sleep? No, for sleep has its world, and the illusion of dreams is more maddening than the realities of which dreams are the shadows. In love? Love has its intervals, and the pauses are long enough to give time for the heart to break. In religion? No, no!" he cried, hiding his eyes with one hand, and waving with the other, "not there —not there! for conscience is most active there, and scepticism comes with its sneer, and I find no more than word painting! and words give us no peace. The grave only can give rest."

He crossed the room, and seated himself by my side.

"Do you want to know what perfect rest is?" he asked, softly. "Visit Laura's grave, and you will find it. I was there two days ago. The sun was declining, and shone through the weeping willow near her grave, like a nimbus of glory around the head of a saint. There was not air enough to stir the

long grass. So deep was the stillness, I could hear it. Do you know the sensation I mean? the unutterable calm which falls upon the ear, and which I liken to an audible symbol of eternity. My mental eye pierced into the grave, and I saw her who rested within it. I saw her face as I had last beheld it—so restful, that the placid slumber of a baby is full of activity compared to it; her hands folded upon her breast; her gaze upturned, with a smile upon her lips, as if she beheld me watching over her. I said, 'Here is peace.' The stillness seemed to repeat the word, and breathe 'Peace!' Should we fear death, Kate, when it offers us such rest?"

"Oh, husband, there is something in your manner that frightens me. What are your thoughts? What is your trouble? Do you wish to die?"

"I do not wish to leave you."

"What is the cause of your gloom? What has brought these sad thoughts into your head? Your heart is not at peace."

"Whose heart is at peace? Is yours?"

"It would be if I could see you happy."

He pressed my head to his breast. Suddenly he relinquished me, raising his forefinger.

"Hush!" he exclaimed, in a deep whisper.

I strained my ears, but heard nothing.

"Kate," he muttered, his face quite white, "did you hear my name called?"

"No."

"Kate," he cried imploringly, "I am haunted! there is a voice in the air that calls me. I have heard it before—I heard it then. Did you not hear it?"

There was a distressed anxiety in his manner, and he looked at me with wild eyes.

"I did not hear it," I answered, feeling quick shudders running through my body. "It was your fancy."

"I have heard it three times. Is it a summons?.....You are deceiving me," he cried. "You heard it."

"I swear not. I heard nothing. This is a delusion, yet I can sympathise with it; for once when in the Angels' Court I heard, as I imagined, a cry. You have talked yourself into moodiness. Take my hand—pass your arm around me. You have asked me to come between you and your thoughts—let me do so now."

"I have heard it three times," he muttered to himself. "What does it portend? whose is the voice? would to God I could see the

shadow—for I am no coward and would challenge it and know it."

Now indeed was I sure that I had rightly conjectured him tormented by a delusion. I earnestly prayed that his fears would make him define its nature to me, that by knowing, I might extinguish it.

"How long is it," I asked, "since you first heard this voice?" He did not heed me; he was looking around him as if in search of something that eluded his gaze. I repeated my question. He turned his eyes painfully on mine and answered:

"I heard it first a week ago."

My hope sank: if it were no older than a week it could not be the cause of his melancholy. Yet one delusion would generate another, and in the parent of this delusion I might hope to find the secret of his trouble.

"What makes you fancy that you heard this voice?"

"How can I tell?" he answered irritably. "The spirit may hold commune with intelligences as invisible as itself."

I was amazed to hear him express such a faith as this; a faith which he would have ridiculed in me as superstitious and imbecile.

"You do not mean what you say," I ex-

claimed. "You are not in earnest. You have pretended to hear this voice only that you may frighten me."

"Very likely," he replied languidly. "It is as well that you should take this view of it. If you believed me in earnest you would think me mad: and mad I shall become," he added with a sudden sob in his voice, "if this lasts."

"If what lasts? What is there to make you mad? Tell me! I know—I *know* I can convince you that you are the sport of your own fancy."

"Can you?" he asked with a smile more pathetic than tears; "convince me that the past—that this present—is my fancy and I will kneel and worship you as something divine."

"I do not say that the past is your fancy. But the past is not the cause of your trouble. Your real past is pure and spotless; but imagination has deformed it with a chimera as cruel as it is false. Tell me what it is."

"Not yet. The time has not yet come."

"Will it ever come?"

"Yes."

"When? I have waited many weary months before I was your wife and since. You have repeatedly told me that the cause

of your melancholy lies in your temperament. Will you tell me so now ?"

"No. The lie is too stale. I will not repeat it."

"Why will you not tell me more ?"

"Not now."

"Yes now—now! My own, my beloved husband, open your heart to me. You know how true and devoted I am. There is no secret so bitter that the joy of sharing it with you will not make sweet. Tell me now—now!—whisper it."

I threw my arms around his neck. He put me tenderly away, laying both his hands on my shoulders and fixing his eyes on mine.

"You tell me," he said in deepened tones, "that there is no secret so bitter that the joy of sharing it with me will not make sweet. Suppose I were to tell you a secret that should turn your cheeks whiter than your neck, and transform you with horror into marble ?"

"Your heart holds no secret that could produce such an effect," I answered, shuddering, however, at the wild intensity that breathed in his words.

"Suppose," he continued, "I should tell you a secret that would make you recoil from me with loathing and terror, that should make

you curse the hour you met me in, that should make your sleep so wild that you should hate the approach of night?"

I looked at him and recoiled until his hands slipped off my shoulders. The movement was unconsciously made, but it provoked from him a loud burst of laughter.

"See!" he cried, "the mere shadow of the secret makes you shrink, and yet you would know the truth."

"Your look terrified me."

"Be it so. Let my look suffice. We will close the sibylline volume for to-night. Get you now to bed and dream that I am the noblest and purest of God's creatures."

Nor would he utter another word, but rose and after pacing to and fro for five or six minutes, suddenly quitted the room.

CHAPTER X.

MY REST IS DISTURBED BY A DREAM.

I RETIRED to rest before my husband that night. Indeed I had left the drawing-room very shortly after he had told me to go to bed. I had no desire to irritate him by the least show of hostility to the smallest of his wishes. I guessed that the sound he had heard in the air was due to the excited state his nerves were in; and I considered that it would be dangerous to add, however innocently, to his irritability.

Before undressing myself I stood looking at the young spring moon through the window, floating in a sky through whose dense blue the stars sparkled frostily. The trees stood black as ink in the pale, silvery-tinted air. The night was still. There was something

very spectral and cheerless in the light cast by the wan moon. I felt more sad that night than I had ever felt before. It was the sadness that is born of presentiment. Into my being had crept the melancholy which possessed my husband, and in its loaded atmosphere my spirits drooped and faded, my heart beat languidly, and my soul confessed the pressure of a weight that seemed of lead. I struggled fiercely with the depression. I felt that if I should be rendered joyless, my hope of reclaiming my husband from the dreadful fancies which were eating up his heart would be vain and idle; for, though I should not share in his delusion, I should succumb to the influence of his melancholy and be without resolution to renew the struggle.

I turned away from the window presently, and undressing myself, got into bed. The intellectual torpor that followed the great mental activity which had fretted me during the evening, sloped the way to sleep like a narcotic. I had a strange dream. I dreamt that I was urged—as I had once been before—by a burning desire to solve the enigma of my husband's despondency. I determined once again to penetrate into the old house, nor quit it until I had searched every chamber

in it. Trembling at my own audacity, yet resolute, I dreamt that I rose, dressed myself, and taking a candle, descended to the door of the ante-room. It was locked. A mysterious whisper directed me to knock. I did so, and the door was opened by some one within. I entered, and raising the candle, peered around me to discern amid the darkness who it was that had opened the door. At first I saw nothing, but gazing steadfastly at the wall, methought a figure suddenly shaped itself, and I recognised Mrs. Merton. "Come!" she exclaimed with a devilish smile twisting her lips, "I will show you the secret of your husband's madness." She laid hold of my hand to drag me with her; her touch of ice froze my arm. I endeavoured to scream, but my terror was so great I could utter no sound. Then the unutterable horror of nightmare possessed me. I felt that she dragged me along, though I resisted with the wildest violence, pushing open the doors and pulling me directly to the Angels' Court. Oh! that frightful face! pale as the dead, made unearthly by the reflection of a light upon it that beamed I knew not whence, in which her black eyes darted and glittered. In my agony I threw myself upon the floor; my candle was extinguished; I felt

her seize me by the hair—and I awoke, with my face clammy with perspiration.

So perfect was the illusion of the nightmare, so heavy the shock to my nerves, that I lay trembling and spell-bound for some moments after I had opened my eyes, still feeling the dead woman's hand in my hair, and seeing her horrible face. Then consciousness came trooping upon me, and with a deep-drawn sigh of relief I found that it was but a dream.

But did I dream still? or was the light which illuminated the room real? I turned my head; my husband was not by my side. "It must be early yet," I thought, and I sat up. There he was, at the toilet-table, dressing himself. A candle burned at his right hand. I looked again at the bed, and perceived that he had occupied it.

"Husband," I called to him softly, "what are you doing? where are you going?"

He made me no answer; he did not even look round.

"Husband!" I called in a louder key.

Yet he did not stir. Terrified by his silence I was in the act of leaving the bed, when he took up the candle and walked to the door. He passed the bed: I beheld his eyes wide open, his countenance a deadly

white, his mien and walk those of a person totally unconscious of his acts. I exclaimed to myself, "He is walking in his sleep." I could not doubt it. He did not glance at the bed as he passed, but held his eyes fixed on the door. His gait was steady and slow, as if he kept time to inaudible music.

My love for him rescued me from helplessness. I saw that it was my duty to follow and guard him, though, if possible, not to awaken him, for I remembered reading that the abrupt arousing of the somnambulist sometimes proves fatal to his intellect.

I hastily jumped out of bed, thrust my feet into a pair of slippers, and swathed myself in a dressing-gown.

He had now reached the door. He opened it and passed out. I followed him. He walked along the gallery, down the staircase, across the hall to the door of the ante-room. My heart beat violently. What revelation was now in store for me? He halted before the door, and seemed to listen. What guided him? What was the faculty that had so unerringly directed his steps down the staircase? Surely this death in life is a deeper mystery than death itself! Presently he pulled a key from his pocket, applied it to the lock with

greater precision than he could have done by the feeble candle-light had he been awake, and the door yielded to his pressure. He walked through the devious chambers without any hesitation, pausing now and then before a door to unlock it with the keys which he drew from his pocket, and from which he selected invariably the right one. I dogged his heels with shuddering limbs; I dared keep no distance between us, lest he should quickly close a door behind him, and so bar my pursuit.

At last he entered the Angels' Court. I shrunk into a corner, for something within me affirmed that we should go no further. He set the candlestick upon the floor of the gallery, and drawing out a key, pushed aside a picture that hung lower than the others, and disclosed a keyhole. Into this he fitted the key, pressed, and a small door opened, so well fitted to the wall that even had the picture not concealed it, it would have escaped notice. Burning with a curiosity that was superior to terror, I drew nigh on tip-toe, but promptly fell back on observing that he did not enter the recess. He merely inserted his arms, and drew forth a short ladder, with which he proceeded to the end of the gallery, and

lowered the end of it into the court. So noiseless were his actions that but for the certainty that I was awake, I must have deemed myself the victim of some wild delusion made monstrous beyond credibility by its air of reality. And now, indeed, the whole terror of the nightmare that had awakened me was renewed. I felt more companionless with my husband thus than had I been alone; and it needed, perhaps, but a breath of air to give motion to the candle-flame, and set the shadows moving on the walls, for imagination to have bodied forth on the spot the same weird form, the same gleaming eyes and white cheeks of the figure in my dream.

Having placed the foot of the ladder in the court, my husband descended. I drew to the balustrade and looked over. It seemed inconceivable that he should be asleep, and yet act so precisely, and with such gentleness of touch and tread, that not a sound was audible. Yet I must have had a vivid conception of his incapacity to hear and see me, for I raised the candle in order to illuminate the court below.

What was he doing? Nothing. He stood with his arms crossed upon his breast in an attitude of rapt meditation. For several

minutes he remained thus, stirless, something stranger to look upon than words can express. Anon his arms unlocked; he crossed the court, mounted the steps, drew up the ladder, and hid it away again in the recess. Meanwhile I held the candle, watching him with fascinated eyes, marvelling at the issuelessness of this eerie adventure, and at the magnetism that had drawn him in his sleep to this place, even as it had drawn him in the day. He stooped presently, and I saw that he was at fault. It flashed upon me that memory—or rather the mechanical operation of some faculty that took the place of memory—had set him to take up the candle he had left upon the boards. Terrified lest the removal of a link in the chain of his actions should cause him to wake, I stepped forward to place the candle near his hand; but I observed that he had risen from his stooping posture, and was walking to the door, extending his left hand as if he held the candlestick. Amid the deepest stillness we passed out of the Angels' Court, I following with the candle, which I held up, deeming that he must need light to walk by, so marvellous was the deception of sleep—so wonderful its counterfeit of waking life. Thus we made our way through the

various chambers, he ever maintaining the same equable gait, his footfalls producing no sound, though his accustomed tread was muscular and energetic. Such of the doors as he had unlocked, he now locked, causing me to glide swiftly by him, in order to escape from being locked in behind. When I passed him I looked at his face to mark if there were any signs of unconsciousness; and unspeakably shocking it was to observe how absolutely vacant of intelligence his eyes were, and how completely he resembled a dead man.

At last he reached the door of the anteroom; passed slowly up the staircase, and we entered our bedroom. With singular precision he proceeded to undress himself; got into bed, and lay wrapt in so calm and profound a sleep that, for the moment, it was necessary for the physical sensation of coldness and shivering to persuade me that what I had witnessed was not a continuation of my nightmare.

Strange as it will appear, I had not been more than ten minutes in bed when I, too, fell into a slumber, probably as profound as his. Great fear, like great pain, will produce languor and weariness; and I suppose that the

racking my nerves had undergone left me physically exhausted.

When I awoke it was broad daylight. My husband had risen, and left the room. I looked at the clock, and saw that it was close upon ten. I at once rose and dressed myself, with, however, a strange feeling of stupor upon me, caused by the recurrence to my nocturnal terrors.

On descending, a servant told me that Mr. Merton was in the library, where he had been waiting until I should leave my bedroom. He had not yet breakfasted. I went to him, but not with the intention of speaking to him just then of what had happened in the night. I noticed with grief and pain the absolute bloodlessness of his face, and the sharp misery that lined it. I saw him make an effort to smile when he met me; but the smile was no more than a mere convulsion of his lips.

"You are late," he said. "You have overslept yourself."

"Yes, I still feel drowsy."

"Strange! I, too, felt very heavy and languid when I rose. You would have thought, had you seen me moving about the room, that I had been up all night. I suppose it is the weather that causes this. I am

often sensible of these languors both in the early spring and in the late autumn. However, I feel brisker now."

"You should not have waited breakfast for me, or you should have aroused me."

"I had not the heart to awaken you. You were sleeping so peacefully. I had some strange dreams last night—most tormenting nightmares. I lived in my slumber through such a *hell* that I dare say my body suffered with the agony of my mind, which would account for the debility I awoke with."

"I had a terrible nightmare, too."

"I am not surprised. Dreams—such dreams as mine may be contagious. Your head lay near my heart when I awoke; and perhaps my mind whispered some of the hideous revelations sleep was making to it—a toad at Eve's ear."

Here the servant entered to announce breakfast. We made both of us but a poor meal, though each tried to deceive the other. My heart beat at the idea of speaking to him. But I had made up my mind to tell him of his action, and thus, when we were alone, I began:

"What was the nature of the dreams you dreamt last night?"

"Oh, they are too vague to be recalled or distinguished. They were like the monsters seen in water through a microscope: things which have no similitude in experience, and of which therefore the memory can scarcely preserve the forms. Conceive, with Othello, that Chaos is come again; people the black profound with creations which Fuseli himself would be afraid to depicture, and there you will have my dreams."

"I am not surprised that you should have dreamt such horrible dreams," I said, nervously, "for you acted strangely in your sleep."

"What did I do?"

"Did anybody ever tell you that you walked in your sleep?"

"Never. I am incapable of such a thing."

"You did."

He looked at me eagerly.

"Are you in earnest?"

"I am. Last night, or rather this morning, between one and two o'clock, I was awakened from my sleep by some such a nightmare as tormented you. On opening my eyes, I saw you at my dressing-table. Presently you passed me, holding a candle. The light was on your face, and I could see your expression.

It was quite blank. Your eyes were fixed, and without a gleam of intelligence in them."

He breathed deeply.

"Did I leave the room?"

"Yes."

"Where did I go?"

"To the Angels' Court."

"Then you followed me?"

"Yes."

He grasped my wrist, and held it violently. A violent struggle seemed to be going on in his breast. Now it darkened his brow, until the scowl that gathered there made the skin livid; now the frown faded, and the passion in his face was replaced by an expression of wild entreaty, of mournful distress.

"Then you know all?" he said, in a low thrilling voice.

"I know nothing. What I beheld gave me no clue to the mystery that darkens your life, and has clouded mine."

"Clouded yours! Yes—it must be so. Sin has its obligations, and the most terrible is that those whom the sinner loves and would protect from harm, must suffer with him. Oh!" he cried, raising his hand, "the curse that God levels at the head of the wrong-doer does not end with him. It makes a blight of

the atmosphere around him, and those whom he loves breathe it and die. It is transmitted to unborn generations. He whom God has cursed never dies! for his misery—and this misery is his life—is renewed in a hundred shapes, and he lives for ever in the sorrows of the innocent, whom his sin makes miserable. You are innocent!" he whispered softly, touching my hand, "you cannot suffer."

"What is this mystery—what is this sin?" I cried, moved to tears by the pathos in his voice, and flinging my arms around his neck, as I had done the evening before. "Tell it to me! Let me share it with you. If the guilt be real, let me be guilty with you; if false, let me know it, that I may reason with you. Help me to keep the vows I made to you before God to cherish and love you in sickness and sorrow, in joy and grief, in innocence or in guilt!"

He strained me to his heart, but made no reply. Then tenderly seating me in the chair I had sprung from, he said:

"I feel that the end is approaching. The shadow deepens. The voice that I heard last night will sound again from the silence of the darkness that is gathering about my heart. Human flesh cannot bear these tortures—the

human soul cannot stand this agony of conscience. Stay your curiosity a little while longer."

"I wish to know *now!* because by sharing your trouble I shall lighten its load. All its weight is upon your single spirit. Transfer a portion of it to mine. Mine is a faithful spirit, and strong with love. Between us we may bear this load to the grave, and our partnership in sorrow will but make us dearer and truer to each other."

"Faithful little wife! it shall be as you say, but not yet—not yet! Tell me now what I did in the Angels' Court last night."

I described his actions exactly. He listened with a keen air of curiosity. When I had concluded, he sank his head on his hand, and remained for a long time lost in thought.

"What does this teach me?" he asked. "That this machine, this body, can be independent of the soul on occasions. My soul last night was in a torpor—it had, in effect, no being. It was dead within me, for it operated neither in consciousness nor memory, the two conditions of the soul's existence. Yet I moved and acted and did not less than I could have done had I been awake. What then is the soul? It is an informing, but not an

essential principle of life, for you beheld me last night acting without its aid. If it be immortal, how could it be torpid? That which lives always can know no suspension."

"Why do you harass yourself with these speculations? Surely the belief in the soul is necessary to us, if on no higher ground than for the preservation of our self-dignity."

"If belief could end *there!* We believe in the soul, because we hope for a future after this life. I say *we* hope. I do not. I wish for no future. I desire extinction, not perpetuation. What is the bliss that *I* could enter upon, if the conscience, if the soul that maddens me here be renewed in paradise? I desire simply to die, and by death I mean the oblivion from which there is no awaking."

"These thoughts are merely begotten by the mood you are now in. Happiness will induce pure desires, and you will long for—as you deserve—those heavenly rewards which God offers to all His children if they will but prove themselves worthy of them."

"Oh, Kate, what faith is more touching than a woman's?—what loyalty more enduring? You tell me I deserve the rewards . . . Oh, God! your belief in me ought to atone."

"For what?—what need have you for atonement?—what have you done?"

But he merely smiled, and answered—

"Patience. The end is coming; do you not feel the gloom? Look at that sky. It is bright in your eyes; I see the soft April blue reflected in them, and its light is in your soul. But that sky is livid to me, and there is a deep stain, a blood-red gash right across the face of it. What sun will melt that sign out? What sun will make that sky blue again?"

He looked and spoke as if he beheld what he described. I hoped to lead him away from his thoughts by appearing to fall into his humour.

"The colours that you see are not in the sky, but in your eyes, and it is your heart that puts them in your eyes, because it is gloomy and cheerless. In reality we see with our spirit, not with our eyes. That makes the beauty or the ugliness we find. After you had told me you loved me, the world seemed more beautiful than it had ever appeared before. The blue was sweeter, the trees nobler, this house took a new grandeur. But when you have spoken crossly to me, this loveliness has passed away, and over all has

spread just the same gloom that you now fancy you behold."

My words, however, found him lost in reflection. Judging by his silence that he wished to be left alone, I stole softly from the room.

CHAPTER XI.

MY HUSBAND PROMISES TO TRAVEL WITH ME.

I BUSIED myself with my usual occupations during the morning. Shortly after I had left the dining-room, I had seen my husband enter the library, where he remained. I did not attempt to intrude upon him. I judged that if he wanted me he would either summon or come to me. I went about with a heavy heart. The events of the past night, coupled with his manner in the morning, were, indeed, sufficient to account for my lowness of spirits, which was more painful than despondency.

We did not meet again until lunch, and then he came to me with a jaded air as if he had superadded intellectual exertion to great mental distress. Again I detected him leaving his food untouched, and I was so much concerned by his abstinence, which, if pro-

tracted, promised in a very short time to make him ill, that the moment we were alone I exclaimed—

"You are starving yourself. You cannot go on as you are. It is not enough that you are allowing your mind to sicken you, you are famishing yourself as well."

"Oh, I shall manage. I have been doing some writing this morning, and the exertion has fatigued me. I have no doubt I shall make a good dinner."

"It is to be hoped you will; and now do you know, a resolve has entered my mind, and I am determined that it shall be carried out."

"What is it?"

"I mean to make you travel. I mean to take you away from this old Ashleigh Manor, the poetry of which is being killed by your gloomy imagination. Nothing seems to live here now but ghosts and delusions and troubles. Surely we can have livelier guests than these for the asking. I mean forthwith to give them notice to quit; and as I believe there is only one kind of hint they are capable of taking, it is my intention to deliver it. You must take me abroad. In our absence these miserable guests of ours—no, of *yours*—will take flight, go and haunt somebody else

for a change, and we shall return to a cheerful home."

"How do you know they will not accompany and return with us?"

"At all events the ghosts won't."

"Poor Kate! you would give a great deal to see me happy, wouldn't you?"

"I would give my life."

"How little did I dream that I should ever win such a love as yours! Can a man gain such pure affection and be a bad man? That is a grim thesis: there is badness and badness. There is the man whose mind is thoroughly corrupt, who is yet not so bad as the man who has committed one crime in his life which stands like a scorched and lightning-blasted trunk in the noble forest of his nature. Do you ever think of your predecessor—of Mrs. Merton?"

"Sometimes—not often."

"I think of her when I look at you. How prodigious is the interval between you and her! As far apart you are as love and hate. She was a very bad woman, was she not?"

"I always feel reluctant to speak ill of the dead, even though it be the truth."

"Why? The grave does not make a bad woman good. I am no believer in the nega-

tive virtues of the dead. I mean, I don't believe in the virtue of persons who are made negatively good because they can no longer be positively bad. Consider if resurrectionising were possible in another sense than that of supplying the hospitals with subjects, would not the usurer exhumed go back to his money-bags and bill-discounting; the sot to his bottle; the miser to his garret and gold; the blackguard to his low company? What virtues does the grave impart that we should speak well, or not ill, of the corpse? If the grave could yield up Laura's mother, would she not come back to me with her hate, and temper, and sneers? The time she has spent in the grave would be but as a sleep to her, and dreamless sleep does not reform the character."

"The helplessness of the dead should make us tender of their name. They are no longer able to defend themselves."

"That is sentiment; but it is touching and pure, and I will not argue. When do you propose to carry me on my travels?"

"Whenever you will—the sooner the better—to-morrow if we could; but as that would give us no time, say on Monday."

"Monday—four days hence. In four days

much may happen. What an interval there is even between this moment and the next. It is so short that as you hold up your finger it passes—it is so vast that it will hold eternity. Monday, that is the day you fix ?"

"Will you come ?"

"If all goes well."

"Then I do not fear," I exclaimed gladly. "Only promise that you will leave Ashleigh Manor on Monday."

"I promise," he said, with a strange solemnity.

I did not heed his manner. A new and unaccustomed joy had sprung up in my heart. A ray of blessed sunlight, it seemed to me, had pierced the deep gloom which enveloped our lives. I felt that if I could but draw him away from Ashleigh Manor we might be happy yet.

"Now that you are in the humour," I said, "you shall draw me up a programme of our journey."

"Where shall we go ?" he replied, smiling softly. "They call America the new world. I should like to visit a new world. Shall we go to America ?"

"I would as soon go there as elsewhere. But it is a long way off."

"A new world ought to be remote—remote enough not to echo any of the old world's notes. But is America distant enough for this? I fear that this new world is no better than an imitation of the old. Let us seek a country where we shall not find ourselves aped; veritably a new country. A small Pacific island would suffice—though I should prefer the regions of the Equator, for the nearer we are to the sun, the nearer we shall be to heaven."

"We will go wherever you choose, providing we go on Monday."

"Certainly we will go on Monday. But you have asked me for a programme. I suggested the New World because the name is hopeful; but on reflection, the New World is made unpromising by its reputed likeness to the old. Who was the satirist, I wonder, that first called America the New World? How must the irony affect a visitor at New York! What is there new world-like in the greed of gold, in the gallows, in prisons, alehouses, theatres, murderers, grave-diggers, money-lenders, parsons, and women who flourish in the United States? New World! There is the morning star. Shall we post thither? It will be a new world to us. It heralds the sun,

and we may therefore hope that there will always be light behind us—which is more than we can say here ; for to most of us the past is black enough — the sun shines in front."

His manner rescued his language from levity; but if there were more sadness in it than briskness, it still pleased me ; it seemed, at all events, as if the cloud of his melancholy were breaking up.

"You may propose to go to the moon if you like," I answered, laughing ; "but I have your promise to take me away from Ashleigh Manor, and I shall keep you to it."

"We should fix upon a destination."

"Well then," said I, "let us go to Paris first. If we were to remain there for three months and then come home, it would answer my purpose. But I *must* take you away. Why, you have never stirred out of this house, beyond an hour's walk or drive, for two years. No wonder you are gloomy ! No wonder you walk in your sleep ! No wonder you are deluded ! I dare say the prisoner sees frightful things in his cell. You have made a prison of what should be in reality a most delightful residence. You have cut yourself off from all your friends. You refuse

to go into the world where there is novelty and sunlight, where there are gay cities and festive crowds, amid which, if sorrow pursued you, you could give it the slip. I am *determined*," I repeated, heated by my own reasoning, "to make you leave Ashleigh Manor. Remember you have promised!"

"I will go," he answered languidly. "I agree with you—Ashleigh Manor is too much a prison-house for me. It is time I left it. I am weary of it—more weary than words can express. I want rest, and I cannot find it here. Yet, it is a noble old house, is it not? I was looking at it yesterday afternoon from the avenue; the sun was shining upon it, lighting up its ancient front like a smile on an aged but a still handsome face. The fine trees standing around it gave it an air of pleasant retirement. The rooks were cawing. Far away the church bells at Ashleigh were pealing. My affection for these old haunts rose in me full and strong—for *you* had contributed the sweetest of all the memories it holds, and for the moment it seemed as if love had blessed and consecrated my home. What should make it abhorrent to me, then? I love it—yet it is detestable! When the sunshine streams most brightly upon it, no mid-

night gloom is deeper than that which in my sight envelopes it."

"This is because you ought to leave it for awhile."

"Ay, you are right. I must leave it. Its gloom is too oppressive. I will leave it—I will leave it," he muttered.

"And you will return to it happy. I mean to be your physician. I shall not dream of letting you return until every trace of your melancholy has vanished."

He looked at me with a smile and took my hand.

"What are you going to do, Kate, this afternoon?"

"Nothing in particular. I was thinking of taking a walk. Will you come?"

"No, I feel lazy. I *walked* too far last night. I shall rest a little. You will not be long gone?"

"I shall not go at all. I should prefer to remain with you."

"No, I wish you to go. You look pale after last night's adventure, and the fresh air will do you good. Go to the sands; the air is salt and sweet there."

"I want to remain with you."

"I should ask you to do so if I didn't feel

sleepy. I mean to take a nap. Go now while the sun is shining."

"Very well; but first repeat your promise that you will leave with me on Monday."

"I have made up my mind. I have told you I cannot continue living here."

"Mind! when Monday comes I will not let you back out of it."

"No, I swear. Kiss me, Kate, before you go."

He took me in his arms.

"You have been a true and devoted wife to me," he said, still holding me. "God will bless you for your constancy and sweetness even though you have wasted those lovely qualities on one who deserves—no matter what. It would have been well for me had I married only you."

He relinquished me. "Only fools bewail the past. I must make haste to get away from the gloomy memories which make this house sad. Monday is it? Go and take your walk now. I shall try and get some sleep."

He went to the door and there lingered a moment looking at me. His eyes were fond but deeply miserable. He waved his hand and passed out.

Demonstrations of his melancholy in forms

more or less defined were so familiar to me, that I was not more impressed by his manner now than I had ever been by the rest of his conduct. Indeed, compared with the feelings that possessed me in the morning, I was light-hearted; for I had won from him a promise to leave with me on Monday, and in that departure I was sure lay a real and, perhaps, the only chance of my reclaiming his heart from the melancholy that devoured it.

I went to my bedroom, and slipping on my hat and cloak left the house. I walked briskly in the direction of the sands. The sea was very smooth; the crisp breakers curled their sparkling froth upon the beach, leaving a broad margin, black and glistening, under the yellow sunlight. There was hardly air enough to flap the sails of a vessel rocking gently a mile off, towed by some men in a boat, their oars flashing like the gleam of jewels as they bent to their labour. Somewhat tired by the briskness of my walk, I seated myself in order to recruit my energies for the return home. I rested, unconsciously, on the very rock whereon I had been seated that day when I had seen Captain Fowler and Mrs. Merton together. There was the recess in the cliff where they had stood. How little that woman

had guessed at that time of the frightful death that was in store for her! Memory rushed back and renewed those buried days. I was Mr. Merton's wife. The timid-hearted governess who had been dismayed by the grandeur of Ashleigh Manor, and who had wondered at her own temerity in accepting the place of governess in so fine a house, was now its mistress! What strange experiences had been mine! I thought of my husband's sorrow. The breakers sang on the beach and whispered hope. How noble was that scene of rugged cliff and brown sand, and sharp black rocks mirroring their forms in the circling green, the rocking vessel in the distance, the mighty stretch of water running into the sky and melting in a tender haze of pale blue! I would have given much for my husband to have been with me: for there was a touching eloquence in the beauty that lay around, and I was sure that he could not have listened to its appeals without feeling his heart softened, his melancholy moderated, and his soul opening under the eye of that benign Being who had given us this lovely and shining world to live in.

My excursion by the time I reached Ashleigh Manor had occupied me an hour and a

half. The library door was closed as I passed it, and I had half a mind to peep in and see if my husband was there. I thought, however, that I would take off my things first, and so went to my bedroom. I drew to the toilet-glass. Whilst taking up the brush my eye fell upon a roll of paper. It was sealed at both ends and addressed, "To my dear wife." I was greatly surprised. My first idea was that this packet bore reference to my husband's first wife, and that it contained some letters which he might wish me to read. Then it suddenly flashed upon me that this packet contained the revelation of the secret of his melancholy. He had told me to have patience —that he would tell me all before long. The time for disclosure had arrived at last; and this was the way he had chosen to make his confession. I silenced all further speculations by tearing open the cover and opening the manuscript. It lies before me as I write, and I will transcribe it word for word.

CHAPTER XII.

MY HUSBAND'S CONFESSION.

"BELOVED wife: I have told you that the time was at hand when I should reveal the secret which, after making me wretched beyond the power of language to convey, threatens at last to drive me mad. That time has now come. The power of endurance which has enabled me to hold myself erect under a cruel and crushing weight has abandoned me. The will which I deemed all-powerful has failed me.

"Never—I take God to witness—never into the whole lifetime of the most unhappy man that ever lived, did there enter more unutterable misery than has been compressed in the last two years of my existence. To be thought good, and to know myself wicked beyond conception; to be thought honest, and to know

myself false; to have loving eyes looking up into my face, loving me and honouring me, when my heart has held a secret so enormous that its disclosure would have driven my child and you away hating, fearing, loathing me! how have I endured this so long? Why has not God, to whom my breaking heart appealed for death, listened to my entreaty and permitted me to die?

"I might have been an honourable man. I have had many virtues. I loved truth. I have been charitable. I have looked upon this world with gratitude to my Maker for His beneficent gift of beauty, and for the intellect He gave me with which to admire it. I reverenced little children, and what is upright and noble and pure in men. There was not one of my fellow-creatures I would have harmed. And the world believed me—justly believed me—a good man.

"Have all these virtues perished? No; your love teaches me to know that sin has not dimmed all the original brightness of my nature. And how have I thanked you for witnessing in me rays of that glory of innocence and honour which I believed the hand of Crime had totally extinguished! Often has your faith in me, both before and since

our marriage, kindled anew the inverted torch of hope; and amid the short-lived splendour I have beheld touching visions of redemption and happiness. But the gloom deepened until no light could pierce it. The atmosphere grew loaded and poisonous, and no light could live in it.

"My wife! would to God it were in my power to call thee by some fonder name—for that title is hateful to me. It typifies my misery. It figures a despair so great that if God be just He will accept my long agony here as the atonement for my wrongs. The woman I first called wife I hated—I still hate. The thought of her is detestable! All the devil within me awakens at the name, and I exult over the deed that rid me of her in the very face of the misery with which my crime has overwhelmed me. For how long—for how long did I suffer in silence! sitting with submissive face but with a burning heart before her vile taunts, her cruel, malignant temper! For how long did I keep at bay the demon which she had conjured up, making my spirit a cell for it, in which it moaned, and shook its chain, and fought to free itself until my being trembled under its fury, and reason herself swayed upon her throne! It was ever my

child—my dead Laura who came between her mother and me. Often has my lost darling's purity risen, as though God had sent an angel to hold my wife and me asunder; and she has unconsciously rebuked me with her mild sweet eyes, and sent me to drown in a passion of tears the mad thoughts which had been leaping in my breast.

"Divorce myself from her, live apart from her, I would not, for Laura's sake. I never thought that my child would die. My hope, my ambition was to save her from the contagion of the scandal which would be excited were it known that I had separated from my wife. We had many friends in those days; but none of them guessed that I was a broken-hearted man. My wife's temper was indeed notorious; but those who witnessed it could not conceive that it was so formidable as it was, by my apparent unconcern. It was my wish, for Laura's sake, that the world should not think me unhappy. You came to Ashleigh Manor, and like the rest of them, your sympathies at the onset were given to my wife. You thought I provoked her unnecessarily. To this I will plead guilty. I will own to having felt at times a half-mad pleasure in sporting with my own misery. It strangely

amused me to exasperate her by contradiction, by mildness, by the demeanour which was most likely to enrage her. I found a passionate diversion in seeing her in her fits of anger, and a dreary satisfaction in having you and Laura to keep me company in viewing the disgusting exhibition.

"But the time came when the patience I had practised reached its limit; fortitude overleapt its boundary, and became a craving to revenge myself and liberate myself from the weight that was bowing me to the grave. I took the resolution to murder her. The determination was no sudden inspiration. Often had it come to me before in my sleep, in my waking, a shapeless monster withering my heart with its accurst suggestions, yet growing familiar as it grew more defined, and losing in its clearer development the horror with which its shapelessness had been informed. How has that thought kept me awake at night! and yet I never prayed God for strength to fight against it. I did not court it, but neither did I shun it: I gave it no prompt admittance; but when once it had found a lodgement, I made no effort to eject it.

"Bear with me, and let your own conscience acquit you of all participation in this

crime when you read that it was the disclosure you made me of the familiarity subsisting between my wife and Captain Fowler, that determined me. Little you dreamed that your hand had liberated the demon which I had so long held confined in my spirit, and that its voice was urging me to accomplish the deed I had so often mused over.

"I left the Red Room that night on parting with you, and went to the West Wing. The hall lamp was still burning. I crept to the head of the kitchen stairs and listened. All below was dark and silent. I lighted a candle and descended, to make sure that the servants had retired to rest. On the dresser in the kitchen I saw an old knife, worn to a point. I hid it in my pocket, urged to do so by some fatal whisper within me, though I had not considered the instrument I should use to kill her. But as I went upstairs, lightly as any felon making his escape, I saw that the instinct which had directed me to take this knife had been shrewd in its dictate, for it was such a weapon as a servant would use, and by leaving it in the room of the murder, I should diffuse suspicion among every inmate of the house. I entered the drawing-room. My forehead was damp with perspi-

ration; my throat was constricted, and I found difficulty in breathing. I entered the conservatory, and passed on to the lawn. The air was heavy and languid. The moon was up, and there were a few stars, which winked dimly out of the vaporous sky. Across the sea I heard the muttering of thunder; and from time to time a pale gleam of lightning illuminated the heavens, throwing into harsh relief the tall trees that stood motionless around me like sentinels. There was a sensation of tightness across my chest as though a rope bound me. I trembled; my walk was unsteady. I returned to the house for some brandy, and entered the dining-room. I lingered there deep in thought. The thunder came nearer, the lightning leapt more freely. I found something in the approaching storm in unison with my mood. I felt that the thunder would give me a kind of madness for the deed, and I welcomed its deep and gathering voice. I left the dining-room, and taking the candle, went to my bedroom. Here I paused and listened. I could hear no sound save the reverberation of the thunder in the hall. Treading on tip-toe I walked to my wife's bedroom, and opened the door. A night-light burned on a table at the foot of the bed.

She lay partially uncovered, her face upturned, her arms extended along the coverlid. I drew near. She breathed regularly, but there was on her face that cruel, sinister look which darkened it in her moments of wrath. Was she dreaming of me? Her lips moved. A sudden burst of thunder shook the house; she turned her head, but as she did so, revealing her neck, I struck her!

"My hand was over my eyes; there was a breathless pause; I heard the hail lashing the windows, and another shock of thunder burst over the house. I looked at her. She had opened her eyes, and they were upon me, but glazed. She had raised her hand to the wound; her form was thrilling, but that soon ceased.

"I looked around me. In the doorway leading to the dressing-room, I saw Jane Wakefield staring at me; but simultaneously with my discovery of her, she fell forward with a cry, and lay at full length on the floor. Great God! how the thunder roared! the earth seemed splitting into pieces. What was to be done. Here was a witness; her evidence would hang me. The Devil is quick to contrive plans for those whose souls have become his. Even as I bent over her

a scheme flashed into my brain. I tied a handkerchief over her mouth, and going to the table, lighted a candle. As I passed the bed I looked at the murdered woman. She was quite dead. I seized the unconscious form of the girl, threw her over my shoulder, and taking the candle in one hand, went downstairs with her. God! what a clamour the thunder made. Would it awaken the servants? The very dead might have been aroused by its terrible roaring. I pushed open the door of the ante-room, and advanced hurriedly through the chambers of the old house, feeling no greater weight in the form I carried than had it been a child's. Where should I confine her? I paused for a moment to reflect. In the wild hurry of my thoughts I could hit upon no room in which to imprison her. I pushed forwards, and entered the Angels' Court. Here, it struck me, she would be safe, for under the gallery were rooms the existence of which could never be supposed, partly because the doors from the gallery could not be seen, and partly because the staircase which conducted to the court had been removed. Wakefield showed no sign of returning consciousness. I laid her upon the floor of the gallery, and fetched

a chair from an adjoining room, which I lowered into the court; I then descended with the girl, took the candle, and placed it upon the stones, for the place was very dark, though from time to time the lightning streamed through the arched windows, and made the gallery brilliant. There was a key in one of the doors, but it had not been used for so long a time that the lock was choked, and I was afraid to use force, lest I should screw the handle off. I withdrew the key, and after scraping the rust off from it, made it serviceable. My heart turned sick at the sight of the gloomy dungeon in which I was to immure the girl, for I knew not how long. But now that the frenzy that had accompanied the murder had passed away, I trembled at the thought of detection. I entered the room with the candle, to make sure that there were no doors beyond by which she could escape, and then leaving her on the stone floor, withdrew, locking the door after me.

"Meanwhile, had the murder been discovered by some servant whom the storm had awakened? I had no great fear of detection, now that Wakefield was hidden. I gained the gallery, and looked into the room of death, and there I saw my wife lying as I

had left her on the bed. There was no sound save the muttering of the storm which was now passing away.

"My next step was to accumulate all the circumstantial evidence I could against Wakefield. I took off my boots, in order that I might make no noise, and went upstairs to her bedroom. There I found her hat and cloak hanging against the door. I took these, and also a pocket-handkerchief from a small pile which lay upon a bureau. As I descended I observed that there was a scarf in the hat, which I determined to utilise as additional evidence. I re-entered my wife's bedroom, and taking up the knife that lay on the cover-lid, wiped the blade on the handkerchief, and dropped them both on the floor. I looked at the body once, but dared not prolong my gaze; for there was something in the fixed look of the eyes which seemed to follow me about, that fascinated me, and I was afraid if I allowed the spell to endure I should not be able to break it, but remain at the bed-side, and thus be found in the morning. I crept from the room, and, drawing on my boots, closed the bedroom door, passed through the hall, and ran down the grounds in the direction of the hedge at the bottom. The rain had

ceased; the air was very cool and refreshing. The stars and moon were shining brightly, and away on my left the dense gloom of cloud was rolling towards the horizon, marking its progress by the faint booming of its artillery. The ground was heavy with mud. I walked cautiously but rapidly, and gaining the hedge, seized a stake, with which I battered it for a time, in order to produce to the eye such an effect as would be caused by a person who had scrambled over it. This done, I threw the stake far away, let the scarf flutter on to the hedge, and regained the house, leaving the hall-door ajar—for my imagination was in full force now, and I omitted nothing that would serve to testify to Wakefield's guilt and flight.

"I was in a violent heat through these exertions; but much yet remained to be done. My thoughts were incessantly with Wakefield. I was terrified lest, on opening her eyes and discovering herself in complete darkness, she should go mad with fear. The moonlight falling through the window lit up the hall. I went to the kitchen and filled a basket with provisions, which I carried to the Angels' Court. I descended into the yard by means of the chair, and on opening the

door beheld Wakefield sitting upright, with her face buried in her hands. She was weeping and sobbing bitterly. On my entrance she looked up, and when I approached her she sprang to her feet, and recoiled from me, backing away into the gloom. The horror expressed by her face and action turned me into stone. 'Wakefield,' I called to her, in as soft a voice as I could command, but the hollow room made the notes hoarse, 'do not fear me—I will do you no harm.' 'Why have you brought me here, sir?' she asked. 'Because,' I answered, 'you have seen me kill my wife, and I dare not let you go free.' On this she came to me, threw herself at my feet, and besought me not to lock her up in those dark rooms. She swore, if I would allow her to leave the house, she would not tell what she had seen. Her agony and terror were pitiable; they were made more appealing by a certain mildness in them which you who remember her will understand. I recalled what you had told me about her friendlessness, and I pointed out to her that she would have no home to go to if she left the house, and that she would be certainly followed and convicted of the murder, for, I told her, I had contrived that the guilt should seem hers. I

cannot describe what followed. Whilst I write the memory of her pleading voice thrills me, and I hate and curse myself for the miserable wretch and coward that I am to have allowed this gentle, unoffending creature to suffer the tortures of the hell of silence and gloom to which I consigned her.

"For an hour following I laboured. I brought her a bed from one of the rooms in the old house, and took from other chambers articles of furniture which would not be missed. I brought her a quantity of wine, and jars of water, and whatever I could conceive necessary for her. When all was done, I turned the key upon her, and went to the old house door and bolted and locked it, driving nails behind the staples, for I was resolved that henceforth no living creature but myself should ever enter that part of the house again. You will find that hall door open now. I removed the nails and unlocked it this morning.

"The sight of my splashed boots frightened me, and I repaired to the kitchen to brush the mud off them. I then went to bed, and, utterly worn out, fell asleep. But whilst I slept the misery I had called into being shaped itself definedly in my heart, and

I awoke with a horror that was never more to leave me. Do you remember the effect your presence had upon me on the morning of the discovery of the murder, when I met you and Laura in the Angels' Court? I was going to see Wakefield; for with my awaking had come the idea that, every hour in the day, was to haunt and terrify me—that she was ill, that she had not enough food or water. When I was accompanied over the house on a search for her, how terrified was I lest the sounds of our footsteps crossing the gallery should cause her to cry out! And for the same reason I hurried you and Laura away, and there and then invented a clumsy excuse—a poor but deliberate lie—to account for my resolution to shut up the house.

"When the earth had received its dead, and silence had once more overspread this house, then my terrors grew quick and keen. In the dead of night, in the early morning, at midday, in the evening, I have been haunted with an insupportable terror of Wakefield, and have slipped away and visited her, to see that she was there—that she was not dead—that she had enough food. The fear that she would not have enough food has made me heap her cell with provisions which I have

carried to the Angels' Court in the night. Day by day she grew thinner, until in the gloom in which she lived she would glimmer like a spirit. I brought her books, but I know not if she read them. She ceased after awhile to importune me to liberate her. She shrank at my approach, and her horror of me increased as the months rolled by. Her aversion helped to harden the terror with which I used to think of her escape. I believed that if she were liberated she would not scruple to deliver me up to justice; and this apprehension made my obduracy inhuman. All my care was to prevent anybody trespassing into that part of the house. You will never know the feelings with which I heard you tell me of Mardon's motive for entering the old chambers. When I had first heard of his trespass, I judged that the ghost he imagined having seen—the noise he had heard was undoubtedly Wakefield—would prove a more effectual remedy against any further intrusion than the severest measures I could adopt. But no sooner did I hear the *motive* of his visit than conscience took fright, and I resolved to turn him away.

"And, strange to say, with the disclosure of his story came the fixed belief that *you* guessed

the truth—that you imagined I had murdered my wife, and that I had hidden or killed Wakefield, in order that her supposed flight might procure her the credit of having done the deed. Recall the past, recall the vigilance with which I watched you, the rage that your sympathy—which I regarded as a mask of suspicion—excited; and you will understand how completely my doubt of you influenced me. So keen-eared, so keen-sighted, was conscience, that the least look, the least whisper, would terrify it; and for some weeks after our marriage I was persuaded that you suspected the truth.

"I married you because I feared you.

"I have learnt to love you now. But I did not ask you to be my wife from love.

"How could I love? My heart was crumbling under the corroding tooth of conscience. Fear wholly possessed me, leaving no room for other emotion. My soul was engrossed by the consideration of Wakefield. She alone occupied my thoughts, day and night. It was for *her* my conscience bled—not for my wife. My wife I hated. I felt no regret at what I had done. Demon—adulteress that she was—the world owes me its gratitude for wiping so fell and foul a thing out of its sight!

"But you—Kate, I love *you*. I know now that you never suspected me. I know now that you regarded me as true and noble and just. God forgive me for the wrong my cowardice did you in mating your life with mine!

"I withdrew from society. I shunned the gaze of my fellow-creatures. My 'bereavement' gave me a good excuse for my isolation. I dared not leave the house. If I went beyond my own grounds, the thought of Wakefield drew me back. You asked me to travel, little knowing the chain of blood that held me to the home my crime had cursed. When the fever came, and my child died, I regarded the stroke as the act of God, and humbled myself, deeming that this great chastisement was inflicted for my sins, and that I might now hope to be forgiven. But oh! what agonies of mind and body I suffered during that time of sickness and death! I dreaded, though I was compelled, to visit Wakefield. I dreaded to go to her, lest I should carry the fever with me, and she should die. I was compelled to go to her by the haunting terror that ever possessed me, that she might be ill—that she had not enough food! The idea of her dying was terrible

beyond words to express; for her blood would be upon my head; and, oh! the cruelty of the heart that could slowly murder this most unoffending creature! Her cheeks wasted; her eyes grew large and spiritual. She would not speak to me. I would often find her on her knees praying to God; but when the door has opened, she has fled from my detested presence into the gloom beyond. I, the murderer, was more terrible to her than darkness and solitude and death.

"How did I endure it! How have I endured it so long!

"I have written that I believed for a long while you suspected me. The fear of suspicion is the heaviest obligation of sin. As the time passed, and left behind my wife's death, which was my one excuse for my isolated life, the belief grew that my long retirement would provoke comment—and I dreaded comment. I welcomed the Callenders. It is true I disliked them both from the moment of meeting them; for I saw in Lady Callender an embodiment of worldliness, crafty ambition, and a capacity of unprincipled manœuvring; and in her daughter heartlessness, selfishness, and an absence of genuine womanliness that disgusted me. But these

very qualities would make them useful tools. I induced them to reside here, judging accurately that they would mingle in the society of Ashleigh, and talk of me as I wished to be talked of. They did so. Her ladyship spread the rumour that I was fond of her daughter. This made the neighbours conclude that my retirement was but a whim, and that under cover of a recluse life I was acting like other men would. I broke the spell by asking you to marry me; but not before the end I desired had been wrought. I still courted the gossip which I knew would be excited by Lady Callender's report of our engagement; for I desired the world to ascribe my actions to caprice, which would effectually remove me from the risk of any darker conjecture.

"Yet how miserable I was! Often did I meditate suicide. I sometimes prayed when the fever was in the house that it would attack me, for I had determined to shoot myself if it did, lest in my delirium I should babble my secret. In the belief that the malady would seize me, I gave you a letter, in which I briefly told you that I had murdered Mrs. Merton, and desired you to remove Wakefield, and take her to live with

you on the provision I had made for you in my will. That will I afterwards destroyed.

"Do you remember that night when you smelt fire in the old house? There *was* fire. Wakefield had upset her candle, but had extinguished the flames before I reached her. The air was full of smoke; yet such was the audacity of my fear, that I succeeded in convincing you that you had been the sport of your imagination.

"How often have you thought me deluded! Sometimes your belief has made me conceive that I was veritably living in a long nightmare, from which I was presently to awaken. But Crime has its destiny, and one of its missions has been accomplished in me.

"My eyes grow dim, for the shadow of death is upon me. I have no fear of death. To me life has been so shocking, that death comes as a rest and a mercy. My heart has broken under the weight of my misery. God has withdrawn Himself, but I grieve not, for I desire no future. I ask but for a sleep that when time ends may yet endure in eternity. For what spirit, so sore and fretted as mine has been, would wish to leave its resting-place, and renew the tortures of memory in an immortal life?

"Hear now my dying request. I desire you, in full faith in your love for me, which you have manifested by a devotion that would have made me the most happy of God's creatures, if, when it came with its benediction, it had not found me the most miserable—I desire you to bury deep in your heart the secret of my crime, and the bitter wrong I have done Wakefield. I have left you the whole of my property, but Ashleigh Manor will henceforth be hateful to you. I entreat you therefore to fix upon some distant spot, and remove thither with Wakefield, whom I implore you so to love that your tenderness may requite her for the cruelty to which she has been subjected. Remove her by stealth, and let no man know her history or her name. She is without friends, and, therefore, if she concurs—as I believe she will for *you*—concealment will be easy. You will find the keys of the various chambers, together with that which opens the door under the Angels' Court (which you will know by its antique shape) in my dressing-room. Free her this night. I leave it to your love to hide from the knowledge of the world the secret which has killed me."

CHAPTER XIII.

I SET WAKEFIELD FREE.

I READ but slowly; passage after passage I had recurred to and pondered over, like a student labouring at some difficult task, for the longer I read, the more benumbed my mind grew, and the harder I found it to comprehend the meaning of the sentences.

When I came to the end, I looked around the room which was darkening under the gathering shadows of the evening, and felt that now indeed was I dreaming. That the facts detailed in the sheets which trembled in my hand, were *real*—that such things as were here written down had ever been, my mind immovably refused to credit. My husband a murderer! Jane Wakefield living and immured in the Angels' Court!

What ghastly merriment was Mr. Merton

seeking to extract from this wild and tragical fabrication?

I pressed my hand to my eyes, that darkness might aid me to collect my senses. I looked again at the pages, turning them over mechanically, and here and there reading a passage. Had my husband's imagination driven him mad at last? Was this terrible fiction the secret of the delusion that had deprived him of reason?

Once more I read over the last page, and then his meaning grew intelligible to me, as though it had revealed itself in a sudden glare of light. I thrust the paper in my pocket, sprang from my chair, and ran downstairs. I turned the handle of the library door, and entered. The room—sombre, by reason of its heavy drapery even when the sun was upon it—was now gloomy to darkness. I looked about me, and discerned the outline of my husband's form extended on the sofa. I called to him; he did not answer me. I stole to his side and bent over him. His eyes were closed; he seemed to be sleeping tranquilly, only that his right arm hung down in a fashion which no living sleeper could endure. I laid my ear to his mouth; he was not breathing. I ran to the bell-rope and pulled it fiercely,

and fled back again to the sofa. My feet struck something on the carpet; I felt for and found a wine-glass. The door opened, and a footman entered. He found me standing upright by my dead husband, so rigid that I might have been a stone figure.

"Get a light—quick!" I exclaimed.

In a few moments he returned with a small lamp.

"Come near!" I cried. "See, your master is dead—he has poisoned himself!"

The man raised the lamp, peered at the dead face, and uttered an exclamation of horror.

"Summon the servants. Let Dr. Graves be sent for at once. Make haste!"

I turned away from the sofa, and supported myself against the table. In a short time the hall was alive with the sounds of footsteps. Some servants entered: one—a housemaid—came to me and made me lean against her. I felt that she made an effort to draw me from the room, but I refused to stir. Such a sullen whispering as went on among the group at the door! I did not need the support of the woman, though I did not repel her. The great horror of the suicide, and the deeper horror which came to me with the knowledge

that his confession was true, gave me power that was supernatural.

The whispering in the doorway ceased; a deep silence fell. Voiceless, but with a quick and sharp agony of thinking in my heart, I stood at the table and waited thus, until the doctor came, never once looking at the corpse, though it lay in its unutterable stillness a few feet behind me.

What interval ensued I know not. There was a stir in the hall, and the doctor entered.

"My husband has killed himself!" I said, pointing to the sofa without looking.

The doctor approached the body. There was another interval of stillness; then my arm was taken, and I was led gently from the room. In the hall, under the bright lamp there, I halted.

"Is he dead?"

"Yes."

"What made him do this?"

I asked this mad question—but did not I know?

"Hush!" exclaimed the doctor, soothingly. He conducted me to the drawing-room, seated me on a sofa, and went away. He soon returned.

"Can I be of any use to you?" he asked.

"Is there any friend you would like to have with you?"

"No. I am not unprepared for this. He threatened me with this act this morning; but I did not heed him—I could not believe .... Is he quite dead? is there no hope?"

"I must not deceive you; he is dead."

He eyed me intently. He was frightened, I dare say, by my stony face; and could have wished to see me weep. But horror and despair had frozen the fount of my tears. I *felt* my face to be as hard as marble. He made no attempt to console me. Indeed, immature consolation is always unwise. What manner of language, of thought, could have consoled *me?* What could bring me back my belief in my husband? What could undo his crime? What sorrow now could give him the repentance which God would demand before He forgave him? What tears could wash away the blood-stain on his past, and that blot more indelible than murder—his cruelty to Jane Wakefield? Oh, God! how *could* he have smiled and thought of her weeping alone in that dark room? How could he have spoken words of love to me—how could he have eaten and slept—how could he have faced the blessed light of day, knowing what

she was enduring, and how long—how long she had been made to endure?

I broke from the drawing-room, hastened up stairs, and threw myself on my bed, tearless, but in such a passion of grief and pain as nearly broke my heart.

But there was a deed to be done that night which was to be as religiously accomplished as if God's own voice had commanded it. My spirit panted furiously within me to go *now*—at once—fling open the door of her cell, and summon the poor, helpless, innocent, long-suffering inmate forth into the starlight and the cool. Yes; she was uppermost in my thoughts. My husband's death was even small in comparison with her imprisonment. Cruel! how cruel I thought him! My idealism—a spirit heretofore radiant in the illumination of my love—turned black, became a scowling, remorseless devil! Then I chided myself. My self-reproaches made me weep; my tears fell fast; a storm of grief swept my form; and when it had passed I felt that something of my womanhood had returned to me. The orb of love was not extinguished: still it glowed behind the funereal pall that overspread the heaven of my life, and confessed its existence by lining the edge of the

cloud with light. I thought of the misery he had undergone, and wept afresh. I thought of him lying dead, and fell upon my knees and prayed for him. Yes—he had been noble. Miserable sinner as passion and fear had made of him, his past had enshrined an honourable nature. How I had loved him! Was *this* the end of my dream of happiness? How ghost-like death had made him already! I seemed to hear him addressing me across a wide and impassable chasm. From the other shore he repeated those words which had so often perplexed me, but which I could now read by the light of the torch which Crime held high. That blood-red gash across the face of heaven, which he had seemed to behold—that secret of which he had told me the confession would make me recoil from him with horror—the vague language in which he had spoken of the gloom that had gathered about his heart, so deep that the light of religion could not pierce through it—all was intelligible now! And downstairs he lay, sleeping the sleep he had coveted, his heart at peace, his spirit—where?

I needed all the resolution my mind was capable of yielding me to meet Wakefield, and conduct her from the house. The neces-

sity of resolution gave me resolution. Had my husband's death left me inactive, I know not whether I should have survived the horror of it. But he had imposed a promise upon me to keep his crimes secret, and though I could not tell whether his poor victim would aid me to fulfil his wish, the difficulty of leading her from the house unobserved, and of knowing what to do with her when I should have got her away from Ashleigh Manor, supplied me with such matter for thought as at least arrested the impetuosity of grief.

I heard footsteps pacing to and fro along the gallery; but they did not disturb the deep reverie into which I was plunged. By degrees I succeeded in shaping out a clear and definite plan. And with this plan had come a fixed resolution not to take the property that had been left me. It might go to whoever had the next claim to it: *mine* I determined it should not be. Over Ashleigh Manor and the fortune that appertained to its possessor, lay a shadow so deep and ensanguined that I shrank from the idea of possessing the splendid legacy, as if the horror with which it was indissolubly linked was to descend with it in a tangible and material form. Let those who

would, live at Ashleigh Manor, and let them enjoy if they could the income that went with it; my aunt's money would suffice for me and Wakefield, and in some town or village remote from Ashleigh, I might hope to live down the pain of which the passage of a single hour had made my heart full almost to breaking.

The night came, and found me still in my bedroom, eager and trembling, with my spirits bowed with sorrow, yet with fortitude enough to carry me through the task that yet remained to be achieved.

I went to the dressing-room, and found the keys upon the toilet-table. It was not my intention to go through the hall to the anteroom; for access to the old house was to be had through a door in my husband's dressing-room. I put on a bonnet and shawl, opened the dressing-room door, which I carefully closed behind me, lest anybody coming to seek me should suspect where I had gone, and descended the staircase. My heart beat cruelly, but I was determined to let nothing dismay me. If I feared these old rooms—if I feared to meet her—what must *she* have suffered during the long, long months, hidden away from the daylight and all God's creatures?

On reaching the Angels' Court, I pushed the picture aside, as I had seen my husband do in his sleep, and fitting the lock in the wall with a key, opened the recess, and succeeded with some difficulty in drawing forth the ladder. I pushed the ladder over the side of the gallery, and taking the candle descended into the court. On reaching the hard cold pavement I held the light over my head, and saw, deep sunk beneath the gallery, two doors, so covered with cobwebs and dust that they might easily have been mistaken for a portion of the wall. There were no apertures in either door, no grating, nothing through which light could be admitted. I felt so faint that I had to pause awhile ere I could summon courage to apply the key. I could tell which of the two locks had been used by the absence from one of them of the cobwebs which hid the other. The bolt shot easily; I pushed the door, and it opened.

I entered. The ceiling of the room was low and stained with age; the walls were white-washed, like those of a cellar; the flooring was of stone, but across a portion of it were spread some pieces of carpet. In a corner was a small chest of drawers; about the room were a few chairs, a table, a dress-

ing-table, on which was a looking-glass; upon the floor were piled a quantity of books, and near the books were rows of bottles, jars, loaves of bread, and other articles of food. There was no fire-place. There was an arched way in the centre of the room which conducted to another room of the same size. A candle burned upon the table. On the right was a bed; and seated on the edge of the bed, her hands folded in front of her, was Jane Wakefield.

She looked up on my entrance. On seeing her face I halted. I felt for the moment as if my sight had been blasted by the spectacle. The wildest conception that ever inspired painter, never reached to the height of the absolutely hopeless misery which solitude had engrained in that young face. Young! it was young no longer. It was gray, faded, shrunken; with eyes large, spiritual, tragical; such eyes as those carry whose vision has been fed by candlelight, and who have beheld unutterable things.

She looked at me, and then she got up, and backed away with a mechanical action.

"Jane! Jane!" I cried; "do you not know me? do you not remember me?"

She stopped suddenly in her backward pro-

gress, and exclaimed in a voice low and soft as the notes of a flute—

"Who are you? have you taken Mr. Merton's place?"

I ran forward and seized her hand.

"I have come to liberate you. Oh, my poor Jane! poor, poor, innocent Jane!"

I flung my arms around her and burst into a passion of tears; for I felt as if my marriage with Mr. Merton had made me an accomplice to his guilt, and that I was in part answerable for this poor girl's long, lonely misery.

When I looked up her eyes met mine.

"Do you say that I may leave this room?" she asked, incredulously.

"Yes; you may leave it this instant."

"But Mr. Merton will prevent me; he will follow me, and lock me up again. I do not want to leave if I am to be brought back."

"You will not be brought back. Mr. Merton is dead."

"Dead!" she cried tremulously, the word appearing to inspire her with a conviction of the reality of my mission.

"Yes; he killed himself this afternoon. The feeling that he had you confined here—

the sense of the shocking cruelty he has been guilty of for two years,—drove him mad."

"Oh, wicked, wicked man!" she screamed hysterically, clasping her hands, "God will punish him for his sins!"

She began to turn her head from side to side, and presently I saw her fix her eyes on her shawl, which hung over the back of a chair.

"Who are you, miss?" she presently said. "I remember your voice and face. What a long time ago it is!" she added with a weary sigh.

"I am Mrs. Merton. You will remember me as Miss Malcolmson, the governess."

"Yes, I remember now. Mr. Merton told me he had married you. What a cruel man your husband was to keep me locked up here! See how dark it is. He could give me no fire, and in winter it was so cold that I have cried with the pain in my feet. I swore, I took God to witness, that I would never say I had seen him kill his wife, if he would let me go free. But he wouldn't—he wouldn't!" she cried, sobbing.

"You are free now. Come with me. There *is your* shawl."

I took it and threw it over her shoulders; and I also gave her her hat, which I found in a corner. I cannot describe the effect which those dark rooms had on me. The air was heavy and difficult to breathe. Shudders chased my body as I sought to penetrate with my eye the blackness of the chamber through the arch. I thought of this poor girl lying night after night in this frightful place, and could have grovelled at her feet, so abject the misery she had undergone made me feel. I led her into the court, and when there she said—

"Where am I to go? I have no friends. I am quite alone. If I am caught they will charge me with the murder, and hang me, as Mr. Merton used to tell me."

"I have made up my mind how to act," I said. "You are not known at Ashleigh. Go to one of the small inns, and remain until I come to you. Call yourself Mrs. Bland; that name will do as well as any other. If you should be questioned, say that Mrs. Merton answered your advertisement, in which you offered your services as lady's maid; that you missed the coach, and had to walk from Fairton. Mr. Merton's death will be an excuse for you not to call for a day

or two. I shall have to remain here for a short time; but if you should find yourself suspected, send me a letter, and I will come to the inn and satisfy those who question you. Here is some money," I continued, giving her my purse. "As soon as I quit this house, made more miserable to me than to you by my husband's sins, I will take you away from Ashleigh, and we will go and live in some distant town, where I will try by my love to atone to you for the dreadful sufferings you have been made to endure. Come," I said, kissing her, "let us make haste to leave this accursed place. You are quite safe; you need have no fear. My husband has desired us both to keep the secret of his great sins hidden in our hearts; but if the need should ever arise, the confession which he addressed to me this day will acquit you of the murder, of which he wished the world to suspect you, and fully establish your innocence."

I saw by the candlelight that the tears were glistening in her eyes; but she gave me no answer. She appeared very weak. I mounted the ladder and assisted her to reach the gallery. She walked like one in a dream, staring about her with bewildered eyes, and

staggering ever and again as if she had partially lost the use of her legs. Before we left the gallery I pinned my veil over her face, it being my intention to lead her through the hall in the west wing. But whilst I was adjusting the veil, it occurred to me that a safer mode of egress could be obtained through the door of the old house. I took the poor girl's arm, and we made our way slowly in the direction of the old hall. On reaching the door, I inspected it, and discovered that the bolts had been drawn, whence I inferred that my husband had intended I should conduct Wakefield from the house this way. I had but to pull aside the chain, and push back the latch, and the door opened. At the first gush of fresh air, Wakefield reeled and leaned against me. I supported her in my arms, greatly alarmed by this weakness, which, I feared, would prevent her from walking to Ashleigh. But she speedily rallied, and descending into the portico, stood, with her face upturned to the stars, drinking in the soft April wind, as if it had been wine.

"Do you feel strong enough to go on?" I asked.

"Yes, yes, miss," she answered, with a curious note of triumph and joy in her voice.

" Do you see the stars ? are they not beautiful ?"

I allowed her to linger until the intoxication caused by the fragrant wind had passed : and then taking her by the hand, we walked in the direction of the gates.

On reaching them I knocked on the door of the porter's lodge, and the man came out. On seeing me—for the night was clear though there was no moon—he took off his hat, and opened the gates promptly on my bidding him. I stood in the highway for a few minutes with Jane, repeating my lesson to her, and desiring her not to fail to let me know at once if she should challenge suspicion ; and then telling her to write to me from the inn at which she lodged, I kissed her and we parted.

I daresay the gatekeeper wondered to see me talking to a strange woman in the road at that hour of the night, and with my husband dead in the house ; but what he did or did not think gave me little trouble. I went back to the house, entering it by the door we had issued from, closed it, and walked to the Angels' Court. There I locked the door of the rooms which had been Wakefield's prison for two years, and took away the

key with me. I then went along the corridor and entered my bedroom.

So far the task I had undertaken had by its exigencies supported me. But now that my labour was accomplished, now that Wakefield was freed, my husband's suicide, his terrible confession, the pale miserable face of his victim recurred to me, and I burst into tears. I was indeed wretched. Now that I knew the truth I marvelled that I should have been so long blind. I had never deemed it possible that he could commit any wrong great enough to account for his melancholy. The blow was doubly cruel. It was not enough to lose my husband : the act that deprived him of his life had also robbed me of my belief in his goodness. And yet, how my heart wept for him! Horror was uppermost for a long time ; but tenderness melted it at last. He had suffered more than his pen could tell, more than my imagination could realise. Would not the Recording Angel take into consideration the agony, the remorse, the fears which had tortured him through the long months, and which had forced him to seek relief in death? Would heaven be closed against him, and the eternity upon which he had entered be the blank and nothingness which he had hoped it?

I know not how that night passed; but early in the morning there came a letter from Wakefield (she signed her name Bland) informing me that she had slept at the Ship Inn, where she had been civilly received and treated, and where she should stop until I came to her.

I pass over the inquest and the burial, which took place quite privately. Great sympathy was expressed for me; many of Mr. Merton's friends came with their condolences; but I refused to see anybody. I hid myself entirely away, taking but little food, and almost incapable of resting at night. One gentleman, however, I saw—a member of the firm of solicitors whom Mr. Merton had employed, and who had indeed for many years been the legal advisers of the family. He came from London at my request, and to him I unfolded my resolution not to touch the property I had inherited. He tried to reason with me; he could not conceive my motive. I suspect that he imagined the shock of my husband's death had affected my mind. Had he known the real motive he would probably have respected it. In vain he demanded my reason for an action so entirely inconsistent with the practice of rational people: my sole

reply was, "I have made up my mind to place the whole of the property in your hands that you may transfer it to the next of kin." My intention, I added, was to leave Ashleigh and reside in some other part of England. Finding that I was not to be moved by his well-meant protests, he took his leave. I felt lighter-hearted after he was gone, for such was my ignorance of the law, that I did not know whether it would be permitted to me to rid myself of the splendid incumbrance of the property. I had also my fears that no heir to succeed me was to be found; for I had never heard Mr. Merton speak of his relations. But I was quite mistaken. An aunt of Mr. Merton lived in Yorkshire; she had several children, all of whom were married. Thus a successor was to be easily procured.

On the day previous to my leaving Ashleigh Manor, I had two places booked for me in the London coach. I addressed a letter to Wakefield, telling her at what hour she was to expect me; and next morning my luggage was taken to the inn from which the coach started, and I went to meet Wakefield. I had on a previous day sent her a plain black dress and bonnet, which had been worn by me before my marriage: and as she and I

were of about the same height and make, the dress fitted her very tolerably. She greeted me calmly, but with an air of great gratitude. Her face had not the spectral look in the daylight which it had worn in the candlelight; nevertheless it was terribly faded and thin; and into it had crept such an expression of forlornness and misery as made me fear it would take many years of calm and rest to remove.

I walked with her from the inn to the house where my luggage was. We were both thickly veiled, and thus managed to pass through the streets without being recognised. Indeed had Wakefield been unveiled, I doubt whether those who remembered her best would have known her; for as great a change had come over her face, which two years before had been soft and pretty, as if she had lain that time in her grave. I ordered a private room whilst we waited for the coach, and there had a long talk with her. She was silent and cold at first; but as, one by one, the recollection of the agonies of mind she had undergone came to her, she grew less reserved. She corroborated every word of my husband's confession. She told me that on the night of the murder Mrs. Merton had come from the

drawing-room in a violent passion and stormed at her furiously. She informed her that as Mr. Merton and I had taken her part, she meant to turn her out of Ashleigh Manor next day. When Wakefield withdrew to her room she cried for a long time, being so utterly wretched that she had not the heart to undress herself. How long she thus sat she did not remember; but, imagining that she heard a sound downstairs, and fancying that Mrs. Merton was up and would require her, she descended. As she passed through the dressing-room she saw the figure of a man standing beside her mistress's bed; and even while she looked the man raised his hand and stabbed the sleeping woman. The horrid sight stunned her as if she had received a blow. She remembered falling, when she saw Mr. Merton look at her, after which she lost her consciousness. When she recovered her senses she found herself in a dark place, lying upon a stone floor. From this point her narrative coincided with Mr. Merton's. But there was a part of her story which my husband could not write—I speak of the terrors that had beset her after he had withdrawn, and she heard the key turned in the lock. She wept bitterly here. She hid her

face in her hands, as if to shut out the phantoms which memory recalled. I would not allow her mind to dwell upon these horrors, but gently led her away from the subject, by telling of the plans I had formed. I told her it was my intention to dedicate my life to her, that I would be as a sister to her, that she should never want, and that if I died before her what little property I had should be hers. I informed her that I had some furniture, which I would put into a little cottage, far away from Ashleigh; that I had fixed upon Kent as a county to reside in, and that the day after our arrival in London we would take the coach and explore for a house in some quiet village.

And here, at D——, under the name of Mrs. Dartrell, have I resided at the time of beginning this narrative for over fifty years. Mrs. Bland—the Jane Wakefield of this little story—has been dead a long time; and every day now I expect to be summoned to that land the peace of which passes all understanding. Faithfully—most faithfully—I feel, I know, I did my duty to the last to the poor woman whom my husband had so cruelly wronged. But it was a duty that her love,

her tenderness, her simplicity, her gratitude, made delightful; and no woman lamenting her sister ever wept tears of greater grief than were shed by me on the day when poor Jane Wakefield died.

And now, in my extreme old age, do I lift up my trembling hands, and pray that the good and merciful God will accept on behalf of my husband the atonement I have striven to make for him by my care and love for the poor creature whom his crime made his victim. And for that other deadly sin of murder, I ask my Maker to remember the great agony and remorse of the sinner, and to suffer my own tears to weigh with his misery against the crime which, at the Last Day, will be weighed in the balance of Supreme Justice.

THE END.

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